

We are now in a position to consider Mark 6:6b-30, a passage which opens the third and final sub-section of the “Mystery of the Messiah” (1:14-8:30). This sub-section is highlighted by an intense focus upon the disciples of Jesus. Thus, I will suggest, despite the presence of the long presentation of the death of John the Baptist in 6:14-29 (and indeed, because of it) our passage concerns itself with the close association of the disciples with the mission of Jesus ... and their failure!

The literary structure of Mark 6:6b-30 One of the features of Markan style is the use of so-called “sandwich” constructions. Another term for this literary technique is “intercalation.” Mark regularly begins a narrative, then breaks into it with another narrative, and closes the narrative that he had begun earlier. Two of these “sandwich” constructions are very well known. Earlier in the story the reader finds the intercalation of the curing of the woman with the flow of blood between Jairus’ request that Jesus cure his daughter, and Jesus’ coming to Jairus’ home and raising the young woman (5:21-24a [Jesus and Jairus], 24b-34 [Jesus and the woman], 35-43 [Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter]). Later, after his arrival in Jerusalem for the first and only time (11:1-11), as Jesus walks with his disciples from Bethany to Jerusalem, he curses a fig-tree, brings all activity in the Temple to a standstill, and the next day the disciples notice the dead fig-tree (11:12-14 [Jesus curses the fig-tree], 15-19 [all Temple activity is brought to an end], 20-21 [the fig-tree has withered]). But there are a number of such passages in the Gospel of Mark (see also 3:20-35; 4:1-32; 6:21-35; 14:17-31; 14:53-72).¹²

The expression “sandwich” is opportune, as very frequently in these simple but effective literary structures, the passage “in the middle” has a determining influence on the meaning of the passage as a whole. It is what is in the middle of a sandwich which determines whether it is a ham and cheese sandwich or, to use an expression which has become almost symbolic of Australians since the hit-song of “Men at Work,” a vegemite sandwich. If, therefore, this is the case in the passage we are considering, then the death of John the Baptist is not a foreign body which had to be fitted in somewhere, and hardly suits its present context. On the contrary, it is the report of this martyrdom which indicates to the reader the deeper significance of the association of the disciples with the mission of Jesus (vv. 6b-13) and guides the reader toward a correct understanding of the report of their return in v. 30.¹³

But the majority of commentators do not see Mark 6:6b-30 as a Markan sandwich. Many link v. 30 with the bread miracle which follows in vv. 31-44.¹⁴ Others see it as a part of a bridge passage from the account of the death of the Baptist into the bread miracle.¹⁵

Those who do link v. 30 with vv. 6b-13 sometimes understand the use of οἱ ἀποστόλοι in v. 30 as a rare use of this expression, outside the Luke-Acts and the Pauline Letters where it is common, as a title of honor.¹⁶ They thus regard their report to Jesus as entirely positive: “The description corresponds to the two basic facets of Jesus’ ministry and that of the early Christians. Like Jesus, the apostolic Church spread the gospel not in words alone, but in deeds.”¹⁷ Whether or not this understanding of the disciples’ report is correct remains to be investigated, but its positive nature is largely determined by the optimistic assessment of the Markan use of οἱ ἀποστόλοι in v. 30. A closer look at the link between vv. 6b-13 and v. 30 indicates that this description of the disciples as “apostles,” the only place outside Luke-Acts, and the Pauline Literature where such a description is to be found, may not be as exalted as some suggest. Indeed, it may be one of the more important

indications of the literary link between vv. 6b-16 and the potentially negative assessment of the disciples in v. 30.

After the summary statement of v. 6b, the narrator reports: “And he called to him the Twelve, and began to send them out (καὶ ἤρξατο αὐτοὺς ἀποστέλλειν) two by two” (v. 7a). The remainder of v. 7 recalls the earlier association of the Twelve with Jesus in 3:13-14, and in vv. 8-9 the narrator continues to report explicit instructions on what they are to take on the mission. As we will see below, these instructions associate the Twelve on their mission with the person and mission of Jesus. Vv. 10-11 are marked by a change from the narrator’s report to the direct speech of Jesus. He gives instructions on how they are to behave in a concrete missionary situation.¹⁸ In vv. 12-13 the narrator’s voice returns to report the success of those who were sent out in v. 7. These remarks open with the words, “So they went out (καὶ ἐξελθόντες)” (v. 12a). No longer “with Jesus” (see 3:14), they scatter to do the things that Jesus has done (6:12b-13). The section on the death of the Baptist is then inserted (vv. 14-29). In v. 30, themes from the beginning (v. 7a) and the end (v. 12a) return. Both passages are from the narrator and, most likely, indicate a Markan redaction of earlier tradition. The “going out” is reversed as the narrator tells the reader that they “returned” (καὶ συνάγονται). Indeed, more than a simple return to the geographical place which they had left earlier is implied by this verb. They do not simply return, but they come back to gather around Jesus again (see 3:14). Jesus’ action of “sending out” (v. 7a: ἀποστέλλειν) is recalled as those who return are described as the “sent ones” (οἱ ἀπόστολοι). There is no need to associate the use of the noun οἱ ἀπόστολοι in v. 30 with the widespread use of this title of honor in Luke-Acts and Paul. In the light of the rest of the Gospel of Mark, the word cannot bear the weight of such dignity.¹⁹ The Twelve are called ἀπόστολοι (v. 30) because they were the ones whom Jesus began to send out (v. 7a: ἤρξατο αὐτοὺς ἀποστέλλειν). It is an appropriate noun to use as the story-teller returns, in v. 30, to recall the beginning of his “sandwich” in vv. 7-13.²⁰

An initial suggestion concerning the literary structure of Mark 6:6b-30 can thus be proposed:

vv. 6a-13: The association of the disciples with the mission of Jesus, as they are “sent out.” They are scattered as they go, two by two, to their successful missionary activity (vv. 12-13).

vv. 14-29: The death of John the Baptist.

v. 30: The return of those “sent out” to make their report to Jesus. They “gather” and tell Jesus what they have said and done.

This “initial suggestion” must be tested by a closer reading of the text.²¹ However, one must notice the presence of the key words which state Jesus’ initiative in sending out disciples so that they might do what he has done thus far in the story and their scattering to perform this mission (v. 7a: sending out; v. 12a: they went out). The sending out and the scattering serve as a frame around the beginning and the end of vv. 7-13. The “coming back” (συνάγονται) of “those sent out” (οἱ ἀπόστολοι) opens v. 30, in a deliberate *reprise* of vv. 7-13.

One final element in support of the literary structure suggested above is to be found in v. 31. If v. 30 looks back to vv. 7-13 for its interpretation, in the light of the report of the death of John the Baptist (vv. 14-29), how does v. 30 relate to v. 31? Given the obvious relationship that exists between v. 31 and the account of the bread miracle (v. 31 leads directly into v. 32), commentators are notoriously

concerned about the relationship between v. 30 and v. 31.²² I am suggesting that v. 30 concludes vv. 6b-29. It is the final statement in a sandwich construction which makes 6:6b-30 a literary unit. This does not mean that it is entirely unrelated to v. 31. Narratives flow from one scene to another. In a good narrative one episode is not separated from another by a solid brick wall. Clearly, there is a relationship between v. 30 and v. 31. It is to “the Twelve” of v. 30 (see v. 7) that Jesus addresses the words of v. 31 (καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς). But a new theme is introduced in v. 31. The Evangelist prepares for a new moment in the story by his request that the disciples come away so that they might be alone (v. 31a). It is a brief calm before the storm. However, much preachers may have focused upon that element in Jesus’ words (the need for quiet time and space), the trigger for what follows in the narrative is found in v. 31b: “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” There is very little resting in a lonely place (v. 31a) in the Gospel of Mark! The “coming and going” of great crowds (see 6:33-34, 44, 54-56; 8:1-4) and the theme of “eating” (see 6: 36-44; 7:2-5, 14-15, 18-20, 26-28; 8:1-10, 14-21), introduced in v. 31b, will dominate 6:33-8:21.²³

Reading Mark 6:6b-30

I have already made a number of affirmations concerning the literary structure of vv. 6b-30. They need to be tested by a closer reading of the text, both within the limited context of the sandwich structure suggested above, and also in the light of all the reader has learnt about Jesus and the disciples to this point in the narrative (1:1-6:6a).²⁴

Mark 6:6b

The reader has already encountered major summary statements in 1:14-15 and 3:7-12 which opened sub-sections of the first half of the Gospel (1:1-8:30). The first summary opened a sub-section (1:14-3:6) leading to the decision, on the part of Jewish leaders, that Jesus must die (3:6). Indeed, 1:14-3:6 can be described as an encounter between Jesus and the leaders of Israel. The second summary opened a further sub-section (3:7-6:6a) during which Jesus preached the parables of the Kingdom (4:1-34) and worked miracles (4:35-5:43). But framing this activity he chooses a “new family” (see 3:13-19, 34-35) over against the family of his flesh and blood (see 3:20-21, 31-35), his nation and his home town (see 3:22-30; 6:1-6a). Mark 3:7-6:6a can be described as Jesus and his own (see 3:34-35; 6:1-6a). The summary statement of 6:6b opens a further sub-section. In a few succinct words it describes Jesus’ ongoing personal commitment to the task of moving from village to village, teaching. A passage from earlier in the story comes to mind: “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out” (1:38). For all its brevity, the statement of 6:6b indicates that Jesus relentlessly commits himself to the reason for his “coming out.” As well as serving as a textual marker (a summary statement followed immediately by discipleship material), it has a function within its own immediate context. Jesus’ ongoing commitment to his mission is closely associated with his sending out the Twelve on a parallel mission reported in vv. 7-13.²⁵

Mark 6:7-13

Some introductory remarks to this complex passage are called for. The summary statement in v. 6b may have been already in the pre-Markan tradition, but its present setting comes directly from Mark’s hand.²⁶ It is an indication of his careful insertion of this part of the narrative into a larger

literary design. His hand is also present in the close association of what follows in vv. 7-13 with v. 6b by means of the regular (and inelegant) use of καί. Each statement, either from the narrator or from Jesus himself, is linked to what went before by means of “and.” The technical description of this element in Markan style is the “paratactic καί.”²⁷ The conjunction καί appears no less than seven times in seven verses. However inelegant (and even forced), the repeated use of the link-word καί joins elements of vv. 7-13. It makes clear to the reader that what is said and done to the disciples in vv. 7-13 associates them with Jesus’ own ongoing mission, succinctly described in v. 6b. We are dealing with a deliberate Markan construct in vv. 6b-13, elements of which may have had different origins before they were placed side by side in the Gospel of Mark. There are three constituent elements in vv. 7-13:

vv. 7-9: The giving of authority and the external signs of the missionary are reported. Much of v. 7 could be from the hand of Mark, but the rest of the passage came to Mark from earlier traditions.

vv. 10-11: Jesus instructs the Twelve on the behavior of the missionary in a concrete situation. The experience of early Christian missionaries is reflected in this passage.

vv. 12-13: A report from the narrator, largely composed by the Evangelist, closes the passage, telling of the success of the mission of the Twelve.

Each of these sections has its importance, and their being connected by the Markan paratactic καί indicates that they are to be understood as a unified message on the mission of the disciples.

(a) Mark 6:7-9

Instructions for missionaries parallel to those found in Mark 6:8-9 are found in Q (see Matt 10:8-10; Luke 10:4). Such instructions were already a part of Christian tradition, reproduced in different contexts by Mark, on the one hand, and by Matthew and Luke (Q) on the other. Scholars regularly point to the instructions – no bread, no bag, no money, and only one tunic²⁸ – as a deliberate attempt on the part of the early Christian missionaries to separate themselves from the wandering Cynic preachers who were allowed such trappings.²⁹ Crucial, however, for the Markan context is Jesus’ giving authority to the Twelve over the unclean spirits (v. 7).³⁰ This authority, up to this point of the narrative, belonged only to Jesus (see 1:27). It was earlier promised to the Twelve, appointed to be with him (3:14: καὶ ἐποίησαν δώδεκα ἵνα ᾤσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ) “to have authority to cast out demons” (3:15: καὶ ἔξειν ἐξουσίαν ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαιμόνια). This promise now becomes reality as the disciples are formally given a share in Jesus’ authority over the demons. The unique Markan contribution to the tradition on the sending out of the missionaries is the indication of their sharing in the mission of Jesus. This is particularly clear when one looks back to the establishment of the Twelve in 3:14-15. The intimate association of the Twelve “with Jesus” is what authorizes them to do what, up to this point, only Jesus has done. Jesus is the one who was sent out to preach (see 1:14-15, 27, 38-39; 2:2, 13) and to have authority over demons (see 1:21-28, 32-34, 39; 3:11-12). The Twelve are promised a share in this mission in 3:14-15, and in 6:7-9 they are authoritatively commissioned to begin this activity. The fundamental element, however, in the Twelve’s sharing in the mission of Jesus is that they “be with him ... so that they might ...” (3:14-15: καὶ ἐποίησεν δώδεκα ἵνα ᾤσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ ... καὶ ἔξειν ἐξουσίαν). Grammatically (and theologically) their being sent out to preach and their

having authority over demons in 3:14b-15, depends upon the ὧσιν μετ' αὐτοῦ v. 14a.³¹ The reader of Mark 6:7-9 recalls the crucial relationship between the “being with” Jesus and the participation in the mission of Jesus, programmatically spelt out in the appointment of the Twelve in 3:14-15. One could state the Markan affirmation negatively as follows: associated with Jesus, the Twelve have authority to preach and cast out demons, but separated from Jesus, all such authority will cease. It no longer has its source in the relationship initiated and established by Jesus. The negative sense of Mark 3:14-15 has been accurately translated into the Johannine Jesus’ remark to the disciples in John 15:5: “Without me you can do nothing” (εὐρὶς ἐμοῦ οὐ δύνασθε ποιεῖν οὐδέν). He appointed the Twelve (3:14: καὶ ἐποίησεν δώδεκα), he calls them (6:7a: καὶ προσκαλεῖται τοῦς δώδεκα), he began to send them out (v. 7b: καὶ ἤρξατο αὐτοὺς ἀποστέλλειν), and he charged them (v. 8a: καὶ παρήγγειλεν αὐτοῖς). The initiative of Jesus can even be traced in his sending them out two by two (v. 7b). Not only does this recall the familiar Old Testament legislation concerning witness (see Deut 17:6; 19:15), and reflect early Christian practice (see, for example, Paul and Barnabas, Peter and John, in Acts). It also looks back to Mark 1:16-20 where Jesus called the first disciples in pairs (v. 16: Simon and Andrew; v. 19: James and John).³² In the light of this background from earlier stages in the narrative, the traditional sayings commanding the missionary to go without bread, bag, money and a second tunic may insinuate a further Markan message. This becomes even more likely when one considers that only in the Markan version of this saying are the Twelve permitted to take a staff and to wear sandals (6:8-9. Contrast Matt 10:10; Luke 10:4). One of the features of the Markan narrative is the presentation of Jesus as a preacher and a miracle worker who is forever on a journey. Until such time as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, almost every pericope begins with a verb of motion (see 1:12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 29, 35; 2:1, 13, etc.). When these verbs of motion are read in conjunction with the breathlessly regular Markan use of the adverb εὐθύς (“immediately”),³³ the reader receives the impression of an unconditional response to a divine urgency which marks this charismatic wanderer. The staff and the sandals are symbols of this lifestyle, and the disciples, devoid of all other necessities, are permitted to join Jesus in his missionary journey.³⁴ This is a creative use of tradition that also gives theological weight to the command that the disciples take none of the necessities. All they are commissioned to do is to be resourced by their dependence upon Jesus (3:13-14), by their being “followers” of Jesus (1:16-20), joining him in his response to a God-directed journey. There may have been an attempt to differentiate Christian missionaries from wandering Cynics in pre-Markan tradition. But in 6:7-9 Jesus authorizes the Twelve to join his missionary journey, and thus they have the signs of a person on such a journey. Their taking nothing else is a further sign: they depend totally upon him. “Messengers are not to be believed if they rely upon their own resources (material or spiritual) rather than on the One whom they proclaim.”³⁵ The conclusion to this analysis of vv. 7-9 can be stated simply: the Twelve are commissioned to associate themselves with the mission of Jesus. However, a further essential component to the mission of the Twelve is apparent to the reader in the light of earlier parts of the narrative. Disciples have been chosen by Jesus (see 1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13) and from among them, Jesus has further “instituted” the Twelve (3:14: ἐποίησεν δώδεκα). The disciples, and thus also the Twelve are to be followers of Jesus (1:16-20; 2:13-14). They are intimately associated with him (3:14) and it is from this intimate association that their mission flows (3:14b-15). The Twelve are missionaries of Jesus only in so far as they respond to the initiative of Jesus, remain

with him, recognize that their authority to preach and cast out demons is from him. They remain at all times “followers” of Jesus, and never self-reliant agents.

(b) Mark 6:10-11

The instructions on the behavior of the missionaries in any given situation reflect the experience of the earliest missionary activity of the Christian communities.³⁶ The literary form changes, from the report of vv. 7-9 into the direct speech of vv. 10-11.³⁷ There are parallel instructions in Matt 10:11-15 and Luke 10:5-12 which may each reflect an independent tradition (M and L).³⁸ Mark is using a tradition that came to him from the setting of early Christian missionary practice. All three Synoptic Gospels, when they come to deal with the question of mission, place these instructions in the mouth of Jesus to establish some principles that might guide the wandering missionaries. Two basic points are made, one a warning and the other a recognition of the importance of the task of the missionary, associated with the spreading of the Kingdom of God. It appears that there were been difficulties in the early missionary activities of Christian communities. As well as the evidence in the three Synoptic passages just mentioned, there are clear warnings in Didache 11.1-12. Missioners were to stay in the first house that offered them accommodation. To arrive in a village, begin preaching the gospel, but then be seen to move from house to house – perhaps in pursuit of better lodgings or more congenial company – would make a lie of the gospel the missionary was preaching.³⁹ Thus, Jesus warns: “When you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place” (v. 10. See also Didache 11:3-6). It is on Jesus’ authority that missionaries are now warned that they must live the gospel they claim to preach. This is an early Christian recommendation to put one’s life where one’s words are. Jesus’ second recommendation is linked to a practice reported in later Jewish literature. The Lukan redaction of this instruction shows that there was need for further explanation for this practice to make sense in a Gentile setting, once it was removed from an audience familiar with Jewish practices (see Luke 10:10-11).⁴⁰ The shaking off the dust from the feet comes from the belief that Israel was God’s “holy land.” Returning from the impure lands which surrounded Israel, travelers would shake the dust from their feet. This gesture indicated the impurity and godlessness of the land they had just left, and the holiness of the land they were entering (see, from the Mishnah, Oholoth 2.3; Tohoroth 4.5; and from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath 15b). Within the early Christian mission this gesture takes on an eschatological significance. The place that did not receive the missionary, or would not hear the proclamation of the gospel, was to be judged as “godless” by means of a symbolic shaking of the dust from the feet of the missionary.⁴¹ In a symbolic sense, they no longer belong to God’s chosen people. This was to be a sign, a witness (v. 11: εἰς μαρτυρίαν) against all who rejected the opportunity offered by the Christian message.⁴² The missionaries who put their lives where their words were, proclaimed the gospel in both word and deed (v. 10). They thus had authority to indicate to that place which rejected (μὴ δέξεται) the missionary and the message that they were brought judgment upon themselves (v. 11).⁴³ As with vv. 7-9, however, it is not the missionary who is rejected. They are only “witnesses” to the message.⁴⁴ Although not as obviously linked to the earlier Markan passages on the choosing of disciples (1:16-20; 2:13-17; 3:13) and the sending of the Twelve (3:14-15), it is as emissaries of Jesus that the missionaries have authority to proclaim judgment. Despite its origins in the missionary practice of the early Church, the Markan paratactic καὶ links vv. 10-11 with vv. 7-9 and the

more obvious connections found there with 3:14-15. The missionaries have authority because of their “being with him” (3:14).

(c) Mark 6:12-13

The concluding report of the immediate and apparently universal success of the mission does not present great exegetical difficulties. What Jesus said would happen, does happen. This is not surprising. However, what must be noted is the inclusion in this report of activities that were not part of the commission in v. 7. They were given authority over the unclean spirits. However, in vv. 12-13a, as well as casting out demons, they also preach conversion (ἐκήρυξαν ἵνα μετανοῶσιν). 3:14-15 has again played a formative role in the construction of this passage. As the Twelve were appointed they were promised authority to preach and to cast out demons (3:14b-15), flowing from their “being with him” (3:14a). However, the nature of their preaching is further specified in 6:12. They “preach that people should convert.” This preaching of conversion reaches even more deeply into an association with the mission of Jesus. His entire ministry was placed under the rubric of preaching conversion in the opening summary of 1:14-15 (κερύσσω τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ ... μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ). The healing of the sick is a further association of the missionary activity of the Twelve with the ministry of Jesus up to this point in the narrative (see 1:29-31, 34, 40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-6, 10; 5:25-34; 6:5). The link between the successful mission of the disciples and their healing of the sick (v. 13: πολλοὺς ἀρρώστους), reported in such close literary proximity to Jesus’ failed mission in his own town (6:1-6a), where all he could do was heal some of the sick (6:5: ὀλίγοις ἀρρώστοις), is ironic. In terms of the unfolding argument of the narrative, the new family of Jesus (see 3:34-35) takes over and expands the mission of Jesus beyond the boundaries imposed upon him by those who could not transcend the limitations of his human origins (see 6:2). The practice of anointing with oil was widespread in the Hellenistic world, and by the time of the writing of the Gospel of Mark had probably become part of Christian practice (see especially Luke 10:34; James 5:14).⁴⁵ Much of what was said in conclusion to the analysis of vv. 7-9 returns. The Twelve are commissioned to associate themselves with the mission of Jesus. That was already very apparent in vv. 7-9, but it has been further reinforced by means of the instructions on the authority of the missioners in v. 11, and especially in the deepening of the relationship between the mission of the Twelve and that of Jesus in vv. 12-13. Indeed, they are more successful than Jesus had been in the immediately previous scene: Jesus in his home town (6:1-6a). Earlier parts of the narrative continue to act as intertext to the reading experience. Disciples have been chosen by Jesus (see 1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13) and from among them, Jesus has further “instituted” the Twelve (3:14: ἐποίησεν δώδεκα). The disciples, and thus also the Twelve, are to be followers of Jesus (1:16-20; 2:13-14). They are intimately associated with him (3:14) and it is from this intimate association that their mission flows (3:14b-15). Like Jesus, they go out, preach conversion (v. 12; 1:14-15), drive out demons and heal the sick (v. 13; 6:5). The conclusion to vv. 7-9 must be firmly restated: the Twelve are missionaries of Jesus only in so far as they respond to the initiative of Jesus, remain with him, recognize that their authority to preach conversion, to cast out demons and to heal the sick is from him. They remain at all times “followers” of Jesus. Without him, they can do nothing (see 3:14-15. See also John 15:5).⁴⁶

Mark 6:14-29

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Given the limitations of this paper, and its focus upon the disciples, I will make general remarks about the report of the death of John the Baptist. Morna Hooker has accurately described majority opinion about its location in the Gospel of Mark:

Between the account of the sending out of the Twelve and that of their return, Mark inserts an account of Herod's reaction to the rumours about Jesus, together with the story of his beheading of John the Baptist.⁴⁷ There seems no logical connection between the two themes, but the somewhat artificial insertion provides an interlude for the disciples to complete their mission.⁴⁸

This study suggests that this is not an appropriate understanding of the Markan story. The framing of vv. 14-29 with vv. 6b-13 and v. 30 provide a very "logical sequence to the two themes." Indeed, it is the death of John the Baptist (vv. 17-29), prefaced by a brief discussion over Jesus (vv. 14-16) which serves as the central section of the "sandwich," providing meaning to the flanking passages on the sending out and the return of the Twelve.

There are two parts to the report on the death of the Baptist.⁴⁹ Herod's concerns over Jesus are reported in vv. 14-16. This passage is christological, but the figure of John the Baptist is entwined with Herod's assessment of Jesus at every turn. The first reason given for the increasing fame of Jesus is the suggestion on the part of "some" that John the Baptist has been raised from the dead (v. 14).⁵⁰ The resurrection of John the Baptist may point to an expected eschatological prophet, and Jesus, John the Baptist redivivus would thus be the prophet of the end time, possessing great powers (v. 14).⁵¹ Perhaps there is no need to make such a dramatic link between John the Baptist and Jesus. As Hooker remarks, "It is not clear what is meant by the suggestion that John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead; if such a rumour ever circulated, then the idea of an individual being raised was not incredible in popular imagination."⁵² The opinion expressed in v. 14 may be as simple as that. Thus it may not be very different from the opinion of "others" who suggest that Jesus is one or other of the several expected prophetic forerunners to the messianic era: Elijah (see Mal 4:5-6), or one of the prophets from of old (with possible links to Deut 18:18?),⁵³ found in v. 15. The reader, instructed by the prologue (1:1-13) and the narrative to this point, knows that all suggestions miss the point, but the question, "who is Jesus" continues to be raised by the characters in the story.⁵⁴

Herod takes the former option. He decides that Jesus must be the risen John the Baptist, whom he beheaded (v. 16). These words from Herod ("John, whom I beheaded") allow the Evangelist to pick up the tale of John's martyrdom, reporting it in a lengthy flashback in vv. 17-29. For the reader, the issue has been raised of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, and with it the awareness that as the Baptist went to death, so also must Jesus. There are important differences between the reports we have of John the Baptist's death in the Gospels (basically Mark 6:17-29, repeated in an abbreviated form by Matt 14:3-12 and pared down to a brief statement in Luke 3:19-20) and in Josephus (Antiquities 18.5.2). This is not the place to discuss the differences,⁵⁵ and Mark has made some glaring errors of fact.⁵⁶ It is helpful to be aware that, for Josephus, Herod killed the Baptist because he was afraid of a rebellion by the people. This enables us to see the Markan theological focus more clearly.⁵⁷ The christological issues raised in vv. 14-16 lie hidden underneath the folkloric narrative of vv. 17-29.⁵⁸ For Mark, John the Baptist is put to death by a ruler who recognized that he

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was “a righteous and holy man” (v. 20. See also v. 26), but who succumbed to public pressure (see vv. 22-26). The Baptist would not give in weakly to pressure, even from one who recognized his virtues. He stood by his God-given task preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins (see 1:4). For Mark, John’s judgment of Herod’s marriage is a public call that sinfulness be recognized (see 6:17-19).⁵⁹

There is much in this Markan version of the story, the only episode in the Gospel that does not have Jesus at its center, which points forward to Jesus’ death. He too is put to death by a ruler who recognizes his goodness (see 15:9-10, 12, 14), but who succumbs to public pressure (see 15:10. 14-15). Jesus does not give in to such pressures, not even to save his life, but announces the present and future coming of God as King (see 14:58, 60-62). Yet there is a difference between John and Jesus. After the slaying and the ghoulish presentation of the head upon a dish (vv. 27-28), Mark’s account of John the Baptist’s death closes as his body is taken by his disciples and laid in a tomb (v. 29). According to vv. 14-16, rumors of the resurrection of the Baptist are in the air; but they are only rumors. The Christian community reading this story believes that Jesus has been slain, buried, and has been raised from the dead (see 16:1-8).⁶⁰

Once this is clear, then the theological and literary function of vv. 14-29 within the context of vv. 6b-30 emerges. Mark uses his traditions concerning the death of John the Baptist for at least two reasons. John the Baptist is the messenger of God (see 1:2-3), the one who announces Jesus (vv. 7-8). He has an unswerving commitment to his God-given mission: to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (1:4). It has cost him his life (6:17-29). Secondly, his life and death have close parallels with the life and death of Jesus. A deal of information about discipleship has been provided for the reader in the narrative thus far (1:16-20; 2:113-14; 3:13-19, 20-35; 4:10-11, 33-34). The disciples have had a moment of weakness in the stormy sea (4:35-41) to which we shall briefly return. The reader is aware that unconditional commitment to God’s design and being a follower of Jesus should mark the life of the Twelve, at present out on their mission (vv. 7-13). It is also made clear for the first time, by means of this interlude, that discipleship will cost no less than everything (see 8:31-9:1). As followers of Jesus, they are called to share in the destiny of Jesus (see 8:34-35), proleptically acted out in the martyrdom of John the Baptist.⁶¹ “John’s martyrdom not only prefigured Jesus’ death, it also prefigures the death of anyone who would come after him!”⁶² We turn to v. 30 with this message ringing in the ears of listener and in the mind and heart of the reader.

Mark 6:30

Those who were sent out in v. 7 return, and gather around Jesus. The use of the verb *συνάγω* indicates more than a simple return. The returning Twelve adopt a physical position around Jesus (*πρὸς τὸν Ἰησοῦν*) which is reminiscent of the *ἔσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ* of 3:14.⁶³ That context (3:14-15) was very present in Jesus’ commissioning and sending out the Twelve in vv. 7-9. It returns in the first seven words of v. 30a. But the final nine words indicate that they have not understood what has happened to them, and what they have done. They “announce” (*ἀπήγγειλην*) their achievements to Jesus. This is a strong verb, generally used in contexts of public revelation (see, for its only other uses in Mark, 5:14, 19).⁶⁴ They are the masters of the situation, as they come back to proclaim to Jesus *πάντα ὅσα ἐποίησαν καὶ ὅσα ἐδίδαξαν* (v. 30b). What must be noticed is the Twelve’s transfer of the authority for what they have done and said to themselves. Despite the focus upon Jesus as the

one who authorizes and sends in vv. 7-13, they report in v. 30 “everything” that they did and everything that they said.⁶⁵ This is to miss the point of their being sent by Jesus on a mission (3:14b-15; 6:7-13) which will only be an effective proclamation of the Kingdom (however “successful” it might appear) if they are “with Jesus” (3:14a).

They were authorized to do and say things by Jesus. Separated from him, acting as their own agents, they are no longer behaving as disciples of Jesus. There is deep irony in the fact that the returning missionaries report to the one who authorized them, who gave them ἐξουσία (see 3:15; 6:7), telling him all the things that “they” have done and said. The reader knows that their missionary activity depends entirely upon the one to whom they are joyfully announcing their success. The essential qualities of a true disciple have been made clear by means of the episode of the death of the Baptist (vv. 14-29: the middle of the sandwich). Not only are they authorized by Jesus, but like the Baptist, they are to accept the destiny which the following of Jesus necessarily brings. There is nothing of this in the report of the Twelve as they come back from their mission. They are unable to recognize that they have associated themselves with Jesus in a mission that has to do with the reigning presence of God (v. 6b), cost what it may (vv. 14-29). They come back flushed with their success, yet show that they have failed as disciples of Jesus.⁶⁶

Conclusion

It has been claimed that this section of the Gospel of Mark reflects haphazard editing. The author wanted to include teaching on the mission, so that those of the Markan community involved in such activities would have a “Jesus-word” to direct them, but it makes little sense in its present context.⁶⁷ Mark also wished to tell the story of the death of the Baptist, but its present location in the narrative is judged as an “artificial insertion.”⁶⁸ For some, therefore, there is little rhyme or reason why these two traditions were placed side-by-side at this stage of the Gospel. I trust that the above study indicates the rhyme and reason for the location and the strategic articulation of the traditions now found in Mark 6:6b-30. True to their call which comes to them from God through Jesus (1:16-20; 3:13-19), and like the Baptist, the disciples are to commit themselves unflinchingly to the mission for which they have been empowered by their association with Jesus (6:7-13). As with the Baptist, it will cost them no less than everything (vv. 14-29). They fail. They return to Jesus, the source of all that they do and say, with whose mission they are privileged to be associated (6:6b-7), to tell him everything they have said and done (v. 30).⁶⁹

As Jesus stilled the stormy seas, he questioned the faith of his disciples: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (4:40). This was the first indication of the limitations of the fragile human beings called to be disciples of Jesus. Up to this point they have responded unflinchingly to his call (1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13-19), and accompanied him on his wandering mission as healer, preacher and wonder worker (1:17-4:34). But after the calming of the storm, filled with awe and puzzlement, they ask one another, “Who is this then, that even the wind and sea obey him?” (4:41). They are not able to understand who Jesus is. More miracles follow (5:1-43), and Jesus own townsfolk ask the right question: “Where did this man get all this?” (6:2), but they are not able to go beyond his local trade, his mother and his siblings (v. 3). But what of the Twelve, instituted by Jesus (3:14-19), what of the “new family” of Jesus (see 3:34-35)? The elegant Markan sandwich construction of 6:6b-30 takes the dramatic presentation

of the disciples and the Twelve one step further. Now the Twelve, chosen from among the disciples (see 3:13), are not able to understand who they are!⁷⁰ Dennis Nineham missed the point when he wrote of 6:6b-13: “We may say, in fact, that this incident, which might have been expected to be so important, plays no vital part in the structure and development of the Gospel.”⁷¹ Within its immediate context of 6:6b-30, and within the broader narrative canvas of the Gospel as a whole, it plays a strategic role. It leads the reader from the disciples’ initial successes (see 1:16-20; 2:13-14; 3:13-19; 6:6b-13), through their doubt (see 4:41), via the account of the death of the Baptist (6:14-19), into failure (6:30).⁷²

But this is not the end of the story. That can only be found somewhere in Galilee, in a meeting between the risen Lord and the disciples (see 14:28; 16:7). There they will see him, as he promised, despite the failure of everyone in the story, including the women who had accompanied him from Jerusalem, through the Cross and into an empty tomb (15:47; 16:1-4). No matter how dramatic even their failure at the tomb might appear to be (see 16:8), they (we) will see him (see 14:28; 16:7). But that, of course, is a story which reaches beyond the bounds of Mark 1:1-16:8.⁷³