

Faith In Fear: An Exegetical Narrative Analysis Of Mark 5:21-43

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Abstract

Analyzing the gospels as narratives not only allows for a greater understanding of their literary structure and composition but also cultivates a greater appreciation for Jesus and his ministry. This two-part exegetical analysis examines the narrative structure of Mark 5:21-43 and explores how this narrative contributes to the overall gospel of Mark. A horizontal reading compares the parallel account of Luke 8:40-56 and discusses potential explanations for the contrasting narrative elements present. By examining this passage through the lens of narrative analysis, the reader gains a greater perspective of the complexity and meaning of the text.

***Keywords:** Narrative Analysis, Exegesis, Gospel of Mark, Mark 5:21-43, Luke 8:40-56, Biblical Literature*

MARK EXEGESIS PAPER

The best stories are often also the most memorable, not just because of the storylines themselves, but because of intentional design by the author. For centuries, narrative structure has been employed by authors to enhance storytelling efforts by organizing story elements in a memorable, meaningful, and engaging framework. This framework highlights the moral lesson or primary objective the author intends to communicate. While contemporary readers would most likely recognize narrative structure in classical literature and children's books alike, this literary method is also evident throughout scripture. In Mark's Gospel account, the story of Jesus's life is framed within a narrative structure. Additionally, this overarching narrative is comprised of more specific accounts of Jesus' ministry, including the passage of Mark 5:21-43, which are structured in the same manner. By exegetically analyzing this passage through the lens of narrative structure, the reader gains a greater perspective and understanding of the passage's primary message, and thus, the overall message of the Gospel of Mark.

Section 1: Narrative Analysis

This analysis of Mark 5:21-43 first places the narrative in the context of Jesus' ministry within the Gospel of Mark. After defining the elements of narrative structure, these elements are identified within this specific passage. The final part of this section discusses the passage's significance in developing not only the Gospel of Mark but a greater understanding of the works of Jesus.

The Narrative in Context

The healing of Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman (Mark 5:21-43) takes place during Jesus' Galilean ministry. This period of his ministry is characterized by various miracles and healings, all contributing to the dialogue regarding Jesus' identity and authority. The two miracles encompassed by Mark 5:21-43 exist in a greater series of four different miracles that make up Jesus' Galilean ministry, each an illustration of power that exceeded any prior miracle of Jesus.¹

This specific narrative follows the healing of the demon-possessed man in Decapolis and the people of the region begging Jesus to leave (vv. 1-21). This story contains what is arguably one of the most vivid depictions of misery in the Bible, let alone the New Testament. After the spirits leave the man, the people of Decapolis beg Jesus to leave their region, as they are more upset by the death of their pigs than moved by the miraculous exorcism.

Like many stories in the Gospel of Mark, this narrative follows the intercalation structure. This structure enables Mark's vivid parallels between these two contrasting stories in three different scenes. While this passage is written as if these scenes occur chronologically one right after another, some consider it more probable that the stories occurred separately, it is more likely that Mark combined them for the purpose of illustrating their "common themes and purposes."² This understanding allows a targeted analysis of *why* Mark chose to structure this particular narrative this way.

¹Arnold, Clinton E., and Mark L. Strauss. *Mark*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

²Brooks, James A. *Mark*. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

Narrative Analysis of Mark 5:21-43

The design of Mark's Gospel as a narrative requires a careful analysis of the structural elements within the individual narratives that comprise the greater Gospel. In his book "Reading the Gospels Wisely," Jonathan Pennington defines and explains the core elements of any narrative story: the rising tension, the climax, the resolution, and the falling action.³

When reading for comprehension, most narratives are best understood in chronological order. However, when reading for analysis, it is advantageous to begin by identifying the climax. By viewing the narrative as climax-centric, the climax will inform and aid the identification of the rising tension, resolution, and falling action. For the purpose of this paper, that is where this analysis begins.

The climax of a narrative is defined as the point in the text where the primary problem or conflict reaches its "highest point."⁴ The climax is the turning point of the narrative, where based on a crucial decision or action, the story will go in one direction or another. In this narrative, the climax is Jesus prompting Jairus to "not fear," but instead "believe," and Jesus telling the girl to "arise" (vv. 35-41). Not only does this section of the passage illustrate Jairus facing a climactic decision between faith and despair at Jesus' prompting,⁵ but also the critical moment between Jesus' command to the girl and when she rises, as the people present wait to see what will happen. The suspense developed between these two commands of Jesus constitutes the turning point of this narrative.

The rising tension of a story is best described as the development of a conflict. This could be an internal or external conflict, anything from a minor problem to a major dilemma. The rising tension of a narrative lays the foundation for the conflict to occur, serving as the beginning of the plot development.⁶ The rising tension of this passage, therefore, is the text between Jairus asking Jesus to heal his daughter and Jairus learning of his daughter's death (vv. 21-34). This section primarily consists of the sub-narrative of the bleeding woman, in which Mark includes an exemplary illustration of healing because of faith. While this section could be analyzed as a narrative of its own, in the intercalation narrative structure of Mark 21-43, it serves as the rising action because it provides a model of faith that serves as the foundation for Jairus' decision.⁷

The resolution of a story is the solution to whatever problem comes to a head at the climax. The resolution reveals which direction the story will take after the climactic turning point.⁸ In this narrative, the resolution is the girl rising (v. 42^a), as it reveals the success of Jesus' healing and reconciles the suspense created by the climax.

³Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

⁴Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

⁵Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark. Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

⁶Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

⁷Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark. Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

⁸Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

The falling action of a story is the ending of the narrative. This section typically finalizes any details, provides additional commentary on the resolution, and “ties up any loose ends.”⁹ The falling action in this narrative is the girl’s family being amazed at her healing and Jesus telling them not to tell anyone (vv. 42^b-43). These verses provide a satisfactory culmination of the narrative, adequately concluding the passage in the final element of its structure.

Narrative Analysis of Mark 5:25-34

While verses 25 through 34 serve as the rising tension in the overall intercalative narrative, this passage also contains a narrative of its own. The story of the bleeding woman can stand on its own as a complete story, but it is better understood by its connection to the rest of the passage. An analysis of the narrative structure of the woman’s healing provides greater insight to the intercalative narrative as a whole.

Once again, identifying the elements of a narrative becomes clearer once the climax is defined. In the story of the woman, the climax is Jesus turning to the woman after she falls at his feet after being healed (v. 35). She is “fearful,” either because she believed she would be reprimanded because of her impure contact with Jesus, or she was in awe of Jesus’ power and her healing.¹⁰ Either way, Jesus’ attention is now on her and he is about to speak to her. Both Jesus’ audience in the story and the audience Mark writes to are brought to the story’s turning point as the tension reaches its climax.

The rising tension of the story is found in verses 25 through 32, as the woman approaches Jesus, touches his clothing, and is miraculously healed. These details lay the foundation of the narrative, as understanding the woman’s healing and approach to Jesus is critical to understanding Jesus’ response.

The resolution of this narrative is Jesus’ response to the woman, telling her that she has been healed *because* of her faith (v. 34). This resolves the suspense created by the climax by revealing Jesus’ reaction to the woman’s healing and the fact that she had touched him while she was unclean.

Due to the intercalative structure of Mark 5:21-43, the narrative within verses 25-34 concludes without a distinct section of falling action. Because this story concludes with Jesus’ words before the narrative returns to Jairus, the ending is ambiguous. The falling action here is the *lack* of falling action, which could either convey that the ending of this interaction was so insignificant that Mark did not want to include it in his fast-paced narrative style, or reiterate that the story of the woman is intended to be interpreted with Jairus’ story rather than as a complete stand-alone narrative.

The Narrative’s Significance in Mark

One of the most striking aspects of this narrative is the parallels drawn between the two contrasting miracles. Both miracles involve healing because of faith coinciding with some extent of physical contact with Jesus. The woman’s twelve years of suffering align with the girl’s twelve years of age. Jesus refers to the woman as “daughter” (v. 34) and Jairus asks for healing for his daughter. There are, however, significant contrasts as well: Jairus verbalizes a plea for healing to

⁹Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

¹⁰Arnold, Clinton E., and Mark L. Strauss. *Mark*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

Jesus, while the woman quietly seeks his mere touch. Jairus's faith is limited by his knowledge of Jesus' miracles, while the woman possesses hopeful faith for a unique miracle. Jairus' religious authority gives him prompt access to Jesus, while the woman's lack of influence quietly conceals her within the crowd.

This complex parallel-contrast relationship extends into the characterization of Jairus and the woman. Jairus is introduced as a "ruler of the synagogue" (v. 22). From the beginning, Mark characterizes him as a powerful, well-respected member of religious society. The woman, however, is not just characterized but identified by her suffering. She is ritually unclean and therefore excluded from religious society. Not even her name is recorded. Despite this power imbalance, the characters' interactions with Jesus communicate the insignificance of social status in comparison to the significance of faith. Mark establishes that it is not one's authority that gives them access to Jesus, but their belief in his authority.

When the woman is healed, Mark illustrates a solemn yet significant demonstration of faith. While the woman's "desperation is quieter,"¹¹ her faith is no less strong. In accordance with ancient belief regarding the extension of one's power to their clothing,¹² she believes that if she can just graze the edge of Jesus' cloak, then she will be healed – and she is, immediately. Both Jesus and the woman immediately understand what has happened, but Jesus uses her healing as a public demonstration of the power of faith. He explains that it is her "faith [that] has made [her] well" (v. 34). The woman's faith that results in her healing causes her to become "the model of faith for Jairus."¹³

When Jairus first approaches Jesus, he emphasizes the urgency of the matter and asks that Jesus heals his daughter *before* she dies. After the woman's healing, when he is informed of his daughter's death, his faith is minute if not completely expired. The extent of his faith mirrors the extent of Jesus' miracles up until this point. Surely, Jesus cannot raise his daughter from the dead. Jesus' command to "not fear, only believe" (v. 36) challenges this assumption, presenting Jairus with a critical decision: "to believe only in what circumstances allow, or to believe in the God who makes all things possible."¹⁴ As a result of his choice to believe, his daughter is healed.

Jesus' assertion that Jairus' daughter is merely "sleeping" (Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52) further establishes Jesus' confidence in his authority over death. While he likely understood that the girl was dead, he "refused to accept the finality of death."¹⁵ While the primary message of this passage is often understood relative to Jesus' authority over illness, even death, it also foreshadows Jesus' ultimate authority over death, realized in his resurrection. In the earliest parts of his ministry, Jesus was already laying the foundation for his work on the cross.

¹¹Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

¹²Brooks, James A. *Mark*. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

¹³Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

¹⁴Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

¹⁵Brooks, James A. *Mark*. New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992.

Section 2: Horizontal Reading

The healings of Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman in Mark 5:21-43 are also found in Luke 8:40-56. While the narratives are nearly identical, a careful comparison of the two passages yields discrepancies. Structurally, the passages follow the same organizational pattern, but the greater gospels they are contained within do not. While the significant setting of both passages is the same, they can be understood as such for distinct reasons. The characterization of the narrative's primary subjects is consistent across the gospels, understandably due to the Four Source Hypothesis.¹⁶ While each gospel contains plot details independent to the other, the details unique to Luke bear a more significant influence on the understanding of the narrative.

Structure

Both accounts of this story follow the intercalation structure, with the story of the woman's healing being placed in the middle of the Jairus story. Following the Four-Source Hypothesis, which provides that the Gospel of Mark was consulted in the process of writing the Gospel of Luke,¹⁷ it is reasonable that the author of Luke would maintain this structure from Mark. This is especially understandable given that it unknown for certain whether Mark's narrative is organized chronologically or topically, and the author of Mark beautifully crafted the intercalation of this passage to clearly illustrate the choice between fear and faith. Given that both Mark and Luke were written to gentile audiences,¹⁸ this style of organization effectively communicates the central message of the passage in a way that is not only understandable but impactful.

Recall the detail in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus had yet to perform a resurrection miracle at the time Jairus approaches Jesus, explaining the limitations of Jairus' faith. Within the greater context of the Gospel of Luke, however, this narrative is placed *after* another resurrection miracle: the resurrection of the Nain widow's son (Luke 7:11-17).¹⁹ It is entirely possible that like Mark, Luke's organization priority was topical organization, explaining the chronological discrepancies.

Setting

The setting of significant events in Jesus' ministry occurring during his travels, while he is "on the way" to his next place, is woven throughout both Mark and Luke. In these particular passages, the healing of the woman occurs while Jesus is 'on the way' to Jairus' house. In many cases, Jesus performing miracles while he is moving towards his next destination serves as foreshadowing for the fact that he is moving towards three significant final destinations: the cross, the grave, and heaven. This non-setting as the setting of the woman's healing is significant for both gospels, but in different ways. While Luke's focus is on demonstrating the connection between Jesus to the Old Testament promises of a Messiah, Mark's attention is communicating Jesus' *identity* as the Messiah.

The difference in audience is a critical factor here, as Luke provides an account intended to increase the understanding of Christians, while Mark focuses on demonstrating Jesus' identity

¹⁶Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

¹⁷Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

¹⁸Gladd, Benjamin L. *From the Manger to the Throne: A Theology of Luke*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022.

¹⁹Branch, Robin Gallaher. "Literary comparisons and contrasts in Mark 5:21-43." *Die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014): e1-e9.

and authority to non-believers. While Mark provides a spiritually elementary account for the purpose of communicating the identity and authority of Jesus, Luke is crafted to develop a better *understanding* of Jesus in relation to the Old Testament.

Characters

Like structure and setting, the characterization of the characters within this narrative are consistent between Mark's and Luke's accounts. Jairus is characterized as an authoritative religious figure, "falling at Jesus' feet" (Luke 8:41, Mark 5:22) to plead for the life of his sick daughter. His faith is present but limited and largely skeptical. The woman is characterized by her "quiet"²⁰ desperation and strong faith, and she is ultimately recognized by Jesus *because* of that faith. The mourners are depicted as in complete ignorance of Jesus' ability to heal, mocking Jesus' comment about the girl sleeping (Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52). This consistency is best understood as explained by the Four-Source Hypothesis²¹: Luke consulted Mark's characterization when writing his Gospel.

Plot

While many elements of this narrative are consistent between Mark's and Luke's accounts, there is a plethora of differences between the plot details of each account. For example, Mark includes the inner-thoughts and reasoning of the woman's attempt to reach Jesus.²² Considering Mark's audience is primarily Roman gentiles, this addition reasoning to explain the woman's belief and motivation was likely included to contribute to the faith theme Mark depicts for his audience of non-believers.

Luke contains multiple additional plot details not found in the Gospel of Mark²³. This includes Jesus' words, "she will be well" (Luke 8:50) at the end of his prompting of Jairus' faith over fear and the detail that before the girl rose, "her spirit returned" (Luke 8:55) These additional details may have come from Luke's use of Source Q or Paul's knowledge of Jesus' ministry that he shared with Luke. These details significantly contribute to Luke's account, as Jesus' affirmation that Jairus' daughter would be healed further encourages Jairus to choose faith over fear. The return of the girl's spirit affirms that she did, in fact, die and was resurrected by Jesus, contrary to skepticism that she was comatose.

Conclusion

A narrative analysis of Mark 5:21-43 produces and nurtures a greater understanding of Mark's gospel by revealing the ways in which it was carefully crafted to illustrate Jesus' identity and authority. The contrast created between Jairus' miracle and that of the woman emphasizes the parallel message of their stories: faith versus fear. A horizontal reading of Luke 8:40-56 drives a deeper analysis of the intentions and strategies of each author in writing their unique gospel. While

²⁰Edwards, James R. *The Gospel According to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

²¹Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

²²Branch, Robin Gallaher. "Literary comparisons and contrasts in Mark 5:21-43." *Die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014): e1-e9.

²³Branch, Robin Gallaher. "Literary comparisons and contrasts in Mark 5:21-43." *Die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014): e1-e9.

Mark focuses on the identity and authority of Jesus, Luke emphasizes connecting Jesus to the Old Testament promises of a Messiah.

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