

A Holistic Reading of Mark 9:33–50¹

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For many years, the consensus opinion among commentators on Mark 9:33–50 has been that the passage is comprised of a pastiche of independent sayings or fragments of tradition joined on the basis of catchwords, either by the evangelist or an anonymous traditionist in a period of oral transmission prior to the gospel's writing.² According to this theory, the fragments have no necessary connection to each other, so we should not expect to find continuity of thought from paragraph to paragraph within the unit.³ It should therefore not come as a surprise that many interpreters in effect retro-redact this text and treat each part as a general ethical instruction, without much regard to the way the text is situated in Mark's narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, and with comparatively little effort to discern the meaning of Mark 9:33–50 as a whole apart from recognizing discipleship as a common theme. I would like to propose for your consideration a new holistic reading of the passage, in which Jesus seizes an opportunity

¹ The proposed title of this paper was, "Catchwords in Mark 9:33–50? A Holistic Reading," but when I realized just how quickly 20 minutes worth of time filled up, I opted to jettison the text-linguistic catchwords piece in favor of the interpretive piece. I believe my holistic reading should be plausible on a redactional level even to those who might not agree with my criticisms of the catchwords hypothesis (i.e., those who subscribe to what I call the "soft" catchwords hypothesis described in the appendix). You will find an outline of my arguments about catchwords in an appendix to this paper.

² E.g., Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 233f. Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 409f. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 307. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 505f. M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 279.

³ Harry Fleddermann, while affirming that the short narratives and sayings are originally independent and joined by catchwords, tries to identify the hand of the evangelist-as-redactor and so to discern the continuity of his thought in composing the unit as he did. Harry Fleddermann, "The Discipleship Discourse (Mark 9:33–50)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1981).

to prepare his disciples for the great difficulties they will face as his representatives after his predicted death. In this paper, I will spend my time on the details of my holistic interpretation of the passage, and a summary of my arguments on the catchwords question can be found in an appendix at the end.⁴

The three passion predictions of Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34 are the turning point in Jesus' ministry from the popular Galilean tour of teaching and healing to the march to Jerusalem, where he will be abandoned and killed. Jesus can foresee what lies ahead for him and for his disciples beyond that, and the passion predictions are his efforts to prepare them for it. But, on each occasion the disciples' vision is fogged by their momentary prestige and popularity as Jesus' lieutenants. Jesus foresees that they will experience suffering similar to what he is preparing to face, and so he tries to prepare them for what lies ahead, warning them to remain faithful even in their moments of greatest difficulty.

The first prediction in 8:31 comes as such a shock to the disciples that Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. In response, Jesus powerfully rebukes Peter for holding onto his earthly hopes and expectations rather than aligning himself with God's purpose. Calling the crowds, he tells them that whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life on account of Jesus and the gospel will save it. There is no benefit to gaining the whole world if, at the end, a person loses his soul. So we see that Jesus makes a contrast between earthly hopes, which in their best fulfillment would amount to "gaining the world," and God's purpose, with which

⁴ I try to confine myself to Mark's gospel in this paper, though there are parallels to the passage under consideration (chiefly Matthew 18:1-9; Luke 9:46-50). It is unsurprising that the details and theological emphases of the parallel passages are slightly different.

Jesus associates himself, the gospel, and the salvation of the soul, though possibly at the cost of one's life.⁵

Jumping forward to Mark 10:33–34, we have the *third* passion prediction. On this occasion, the sons of Zebedee immediately come forward to request positions of honor, to sit on either side of Jesus when he comes into his glory. They do not know what they are asking, he says, for that would require them to drink the cup that he drinks and be baptized with the baptism with which he is baptized—and indeed they will. The context of the passion prediction itself is grounds to conclude that the cup and baptism Jesus has in mind are none else than the suffering he is prepared to face in Jerusalem. So, Jesus not only wants the disciples to be prepared for what will happen to him in Jerusalem, he wants them to be prepared for the same thing themselves.

Mark 9:33–50, which follows immediately after the second passion prediction of 9:31, fits very neatly into the trajectory established by the first and third passion predictions. Jesus wants the disciples to know and be prepared for what is coming just around the bend, but they remain oblivious to the situation and occupy themselves with questions related to their earthly concerns. Jesus' teaching in Mark 9:33–50 stands in analogous relation to the second passion prediction as 8:36 does to the first, and it functions to underscore and extend the force of Jesus' teaching on that earlier occasion: what does it profit to gain the whole world but lose one's soul?

Before proceeding into the details of the text, we should notice that the entire passage of 9:33–50 is portrayed as a single exchange between Jesus and his disciples in the close

⁵ In the Matthean parallel (10:34–39), Jesus teaching comes immediately after his statement that he has come to bring not peace but a sword, and that a person's enemies will be those of his own household. So we see that in Jesus' thinking about what it means to follow him, a disciple should expect persecution and must endure it.

confines of a private house in Capernaum. It is tightly bound together not only by the change of locale on either end—9:32 is still part of the final tour of Galilee, and 10:1 begins the journey to Jerusalem—but by the change in Jesus' posture (sitting, 9:35; standing 10:1), and the inclusion formed by the argument about true greatness (9:33–37) with the final cryptic saying of 9:50, "Be at peace with one another." In other words, the person responsible for the unit as we have it today has taken pains to make sure it be read as a whole, and that is what we will attempt to do.⁶

Mark 9:33–37: True Greatness

In 9:33–37, the final tour of Galilee has drawn to a close, and Jesus and his disciples are soon to depart for Jerusalem. The disciples had been too afraid to ask Jesus about his dire prediction or what it would mean for them and instead turned to bickering about which of them was the greatest, probably conceived of in terms of seniority or authority, or perhaps miraculous power or closeness to Jesus—after all, only a few had been chosen to accompany Jesus up the mount of transfiguration, and meanwhile the rest had been unable to cast out a demon.

Jesus' passion prediction is one incident that plausibly could have touched off the argument. If he were to die, it would not necessarily mean that the movement would have to die, especially since the disciples too wielded miraculous power. Which of them would succeed him if he were to die? Who is the greatest? Another possible impetus for the argument relates to what John blurts out in just a few verses: on their journey, they had encountered someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, but they tried to stop him since he had not been following them. We see from this that they conceived of themselves as occupying a position of authority

⁶ On this point, I am in agreement with Frans Neiryneck. Frans Neiryneck, "The Tradition of the Sayings of Jesus: Mark 9, 33–50," in *The Dynamism of Biblical Tradition, Concilium* (New York: Paulist, 1967), 64.

or power subordinate to Jesus himself but over the rest of his followers. That event could easily have led into an argument about how that hierarchy were structured within the ranks of Jesus' closest disciples.

Jesus tells them that whoever would be first will be last. The third passion prediction has a parallel saying, which Jesus explicates by pointing out that even he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45). So, Jesus would have them understand that, at least in his case, service involves giving his life on behalf of others. At this point after the second passion prediction, however, Jesus has not explained fully what it means to be last, so the disciples are simply left with a paradox that turns their conventional idea about power and authority on its head. Their entire approach to the question is wrong.

Nevertheless, Jesus then chooses to answer the question of greatness as they conceive of it. He calls for a child to be used as an illustration. Whoever receives (δέξεται) one of such children in or because of Jesus' name is thereby receiving Jesus himself; correspondingly, whoever receives Jesus is not receiving only Jesus but also the one who sent Jesus, namely God. We should pay close attention to the analogy Jesus sets up: there is a relation between receiving the child and receiving Jesus, on the one hand, and receiving Jesus and receiving God, on the other. The common term in both halves is receiving Jesus. The one who receives Jesus receives God, whom Jesus represents. The one who receives the child receives Jesus, whom the child represents. Jesus represents God by virtue of the fact that God sent him, so the analogy implies that Jesus, in turn, sends the child. In Mark 6:7-12, Jesus sent out the disciples two-by-two, with instructions to preach repentance, cast out demons, and heal the sick. If anyone would neither receive them nor hear them (μὴ δέξεται ὑμᾶς μηδὲ ἀκούσωσιν ὑμῶν),

they were to shake off the dust as a testimony against them (Mark 6:11).⁷ To receive the disciples was to hear their proclamation and obey their call to repentance (6:12), which also entailed accepting them as representatives authorized and sent to deliver that message. Jesus' sending-and-receiving analogy and the earlier precedent of his sending the disciples two-by-two are good reasons to conclude that the child in the illustration represents the disciples when they go out to proclaim repentance.⁸ Through their preaching they mediate Jesus to their hearers, just as Jesus mediates the one who sent him. To receive the disciples is to receive Jesus is to receive the one who sent him.⁹

We see now how the illustration of the child answers the question about greatness. Even if God should choose to send someone as insignificant as a child, the child must be received and heard with all the solemnity with which one would receive and hear Jesus or even God himself.¹⁰ The question of great-est is absurd if none are great whatsoever. In fact, it

⁷ A related idea is found in John 5:23f. There, Jesus says that whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him and in the next verse correlates the hearing of Jesus' word with believing the one who sent him. See also John 12:44ff.

⁸ Urban C. von Wahlde argues that the disciples are meant to receive the child, and, when they do so, they will be rewarded by discovering that they have actually received God. He acknowledges that "the child's role [as one sent by Jesus] is not immediately evident on the human level" but that it nevertheless coheres with the reversal of standards motif of the first-last saying in 9:35. His chief evidence for his view is that the structure of 9:36–37, following a pattern he detects in the passage as a whole, enjoins the disciples to take an action, namely receiving the child. Certainly an action is enjoined upon someone who meets God's representative, but it is not clear that Jesus intends the disciples to take any particular action on the basis of this teaching. I think, rather, that there is an analogy between the disciples and the children which answers the question of greatness by showing that they have no innate greatness and certainly were not chosen as disciples because they were great. Urban C. von Wahlde, "Mark 9:33–50: Discipleship: The Authority That Serves," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 29, no. 1 (1985): 55.

⁹ It is interesting to observe that immediately after the Lukan parallel, Jesus sends messengers ahead of him into a Samaritan village. They do not receive him (οὐκ ἐδέξαντο αὐτόν), however, whereupon James and John ask whether they should call down fire from heaven to consume them (Luke 9:52–54). In the Matthean parallel, Jesus enjoins the disciples to become like children. The persecution they must endure—which is also a theme in that passage—will strip them of all status (becoming like a child). If they do not accept that but persist in seeking greatness, that will constitute sinning and not entering the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). The parallels complement each other with different emphases on the same theme.

¹⁰ Compare the two broad ways this unit is traditionally interpreted, either that the disciples are enjoined to be meek and humble like children or that the disciples are to welcome and serve children. I believe what Jesus is saying is that the child could actually substitute for the disciples. What matters is not the identity of the messenger but his faithfulness in proclaiming the message. Greatness is irrelevant.

seems that the disciples were chosen not because they were great but because they happened to be at hand, much like the child Jesus summons for the illustration.¹¹ They are the children who must be received not for themselves but for Jesus' sake, when, after his death, they go from place to place on the model of Mark 6, proclaiming as Peter did in 8:29, "He is the Christ!"¹² They must similarly welcome their fellow workers who come in Jesus' name and thus represent Jesus as well.

Mark 9:38–41: The Unknown Exorcist

Mark 9:38 marks the transition to a new topic, or so it would seem. One reason we may not want to draw that conclusion so quickly is the abrupt transition from Jesus' answer in 9:37 to this remark by John in 9:38.¹³ The asyndeton creates the impression that John speaks up immediately where Jesus leaves off. This, together with the various ways the author has portrayed this scene as a unity, should lead us to consider whether John's remark is more closely related to the argument about greatness than has been previously recognized.

I suspect that the incident described by John is meant to be understood as the flashpoint for the argument about greatness. By forbidding the unknown exorcist to continue, the disciples seem to take it for granted that they have the authority to control who does what in Jesus' name. When the question about relative authority between the disciples and the rest of Jesus' followers is broached, the door is opened to questions about relative authority within

¹¹ cf. Mark 2:14: "As he was passing by, he saw Levi ..."

¹² This interpretation makes sense of the historical fact that children had low status at this time and place without requiring us to infer an attitude of total indifference to the welfare of children. Although such indifference may have been common in the Roman world, it seems unlikely to have been the prevailing attitude in this particular Galilean family setting, contrary to Judith Gundry-Volf's suggestion. She also discounts the possibility that Jesus is presenting the child as an example of one who represents him since Mark does not say so explicitly, but this is to ignore the sending-and-receiving analogy Jesus makes between God, himself, and the child. Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Mark 9:33–37," *Interpretation* 53 (1999).

¹³ The asyndeton is enough of a deviation from Mark's usual style that it has motivated a slew of different scribal variants, each of which attempts, in its own way, to replicate the norm.

the circle of the Twelve. Just as after the first passion prediction, the disciples still have their minds on earthly things and are using their power in ways that are totally at odds with Jesus’ own purpose. When the disciples go into the world as the children who represent him, he knows that they will not be welcomed but persecuted and ought not to alienate potential friends and allies. Their days of earthly glory and popularity are drawing to a close, and it is therefore imperative that the disciples be prepared.

To emphasize the contrast between his current popularity and the coming times of difficulty, Jesus makes heavy use of circumlocution, to great rhetorical effect that has not been generally recognized. The disciples must not hinder someone else working in Jesus’ name, because at least that person will not soon speak evil of him—a contrast with everyone else is implied. Who is the person *for* Jesus and the disciples? Anyone *not against* them. Jesus envisions a time in which the person who simply does not actively oppose them will be regarded as a friend. Finally, he speaks in verse 41 of the time after his death when they go about proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. They will not be widely received, but if they can find someone to show the least goodwill—merely offering a cup of water!—that person will not lose his reward.¹⁴ Clearly this is not a milieu in which questions of greatness are warranted or where the disciples can afford to turn away *de facto* allies such as the unknown exorcist.

9:42–48: Warnings Not to Sin

The circumlocutions continue as verse 42 transitions from the grim picture of the friendless milieu in which the disciples will carry out their mission to a series of solemn warnings to the disciples themselves. The people who do oppose Jesus and his disciples (the “little ones” from

¹⁴ Notice the progression in the three statements of 9:39–41 from Jesus individually (9:39) to Jesus and the disciples (9:40) and finally to the disciples independently of Jesus (9:41).

9:33–37), who would not so much as offer them a drink of water, will not lose their “reward” either. It is only described by comparison with the prospect of having an enormous millstone hung around one’s neck and then being thrown into the sea—and it is worse than that.¹⁵ To cause a disciple to sin (σκανδαλίζω) is to persecute him so that he turns away from discipleship, essentially as described in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:21): having no root, that person falls away (σκανδαλίζεται) when tribulation or persecution arises. In the days ahead, the disciples should expect to find few friends and many persecutors, but woe to the person who should cause one of them to fall away.

If such a horrific fate awaits those who cause the disciples to sin, the disciples must themselves be warned not to fall away, and this is Jesus’ purpose in verses 43–48. If a disciple’s own right hand, or foot, or eye would cause him to sin, it would be better to mutilate himself than succumb to the pressure to abandon Christ. The body parts signify a disciple’s love of his own bodily existence and self-preservation instinct. God sent Jesus, who is soon to march to his own death rather than forsake the one who sent him, and likewise Jesus will send the disciples, who may very well face a similar decision in their own time. If it comes to it, they must be prepared to lay down their own lives rather than fall away. The options Jesus presents are bleak and amount to a choice between one horror and another: either gouge out an eye or be cast into Gehenna, where the unquenched fire continually incinerates the undying worm. Both are horrors, but Jesus portrays physical harm as far to be preferred to the latter option. Physical pain is temporary, and the disciples have seen that there is healing with Jesus. The fire, by contrast, never goes out, and the worm never dies. Despite the better choice being

¹⁵ The adjective *ὀνικός* tells us that Jesus is imagining a millstone that would require a donkey to turn it.

clear, it is not easy, hence the threefold warning. It is a grim picture of the working conditions Jesus foresees for his disciples.

Mark 9:49–50: The Salt Sayings

The cryptic salt sayings of Mark 9:49–50 are the most difficult in the passage. The metaphors of salt and fire are themselves strange to us, and when Jesus mixes them (as in being salted with fire), it compounds the difficulty. In his recent commentary, M. Eugene Boring affirms that they “defy interpretation.”¹⁶ I think, rather, that the context just discussed provides an adequate basis for interpreting them, but of course the context is only a helpful guide if the two sayings are part of a continuous train of thought begun in response to John’s story about the unknown exorcist.¹⁷

Jesus’ efforts to prepare his disciples for the work of proclaiming repentance (as they did in 6:7–13), even when faced with persecution and suffering, provides the necessary clue to his meaning in 9:49–50. First, we notice that salt and fire are the two symbols Jesus uses. The fire (πῦρ) of 9:48 prompts the fire saying in 9:49. The unquenchable fire of 9:48 warns the disciples against falling away. It is clearly portrayed as something to be avoided at all costs, even at the cost of one’s mortal life. The unquenchable fire represents profound suffering.

In 9:49, however, Jesus says that “everyone will be salted” with fire (πᾶς ... ἀλισθήσεται). In other words, fire—and the suffering it represents—cannot be entirely avoided. Even if a disciple does not sin so as to be thrown into it, he will nevertheless be salted with it. Taking the salting here as a symbol of seasoning food, two aspects may be discerned: (1) the

¹⁶ Boring, *Mark*, 283.

¹⁷ If these two verses are joined to the preceding merely on the basis of catchwords, and without any semantic connection even in the mind of a redactor, then we have no clues about the context and 9:49–50 are inscrutable.

disciples' suffering in the name of Christ will not overwhelm them because just a little bit of the fire will be shaken onto them; and, (2) the disciples' suffering might even benefit them in some way, seasoning them, as it were.

In the next verse, Jesus moves from the act of seasoning to the salt itself, which he describes as good. In a strikingly similar passage, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt should become tasteless, how will it be salted again? It is no longer good for anything except being thrown out to be trampled underfoot." (Matthew 5:13). It is noteworthy that the saying in Matthew 5:13 comes immediately after Matthew 5:10-12, in which Jesus utters a twofold blessing on disciples who are persecuted: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," which mirrors Jesus' train of thought in this passage. It seems that Mark 9:50 presents the same idea as Matthew 5:13. The disciples are the salt, and if they should lose their saltiness, they are good for nothing except to be thrown out into the street, or into Gehenna. This is thus a further warning against falling away when they themselves are seasoned with suffering. It continues the same train of thought evident in the entire passage.¹⁸

The culminating statement of the passage forms an *inclusio* with verse 33, which introduced the argument about greatness. Whatever it means for the disciples to be the salt of the earth, they must begin by being salt for each other, and that requires them to be at peace with one another rather than bickering or jockeying for position. Their work will take place in a world in which they have few friends and many enemies, and they should expect to suffer for the sake of Christ. They must at least be able to count on each other as allies.

¹⁸ It also mirrors John the Baptist's preaching in Matthew 3:11-12. A person will either be baptized with fire or be thrown into the unquenchable fire.

Summary

Mark 9:33–50 can be read holistically as one more attempt by Jesus to re-orient his disciples from their earthly-minded self-promotion to a more realistic vision of what lies in their immediate future. Is the servant greater than his master? As followers of one who will suffer, they must expect to suffer too, for they will do their work in his name as his representatives. The persecution will make it very hard for them to remain committed public followers of Jesus—the least kindness shown to them will, by comparison with everyone else, seem to be a token of true friendship. But, they must endure no matter what the cost, with the assurance that the persecution is only minor and temporary compared to the cost of forsaking Jesus. Finally, they must help each other remain faithful, which necessarily involves working together peacefully.

Appendix: The Catchwords Hypothesis Re: Mark 9:33–50

1. What is the Catchwords Hypothesis?
 - a. Representative voices:
 - i. Karl Ludwig Schmidt on Mark 9:33–50: "Ein einheitlicher Gedankengang läßt sich nicht feststellen. Die Erzählung vom fremden Exorzisten ist ganz äußerlich angehängt. Als Brücke kann man nur eine stichwortartige Verknüpfung finden ..." ¹⁹
 - ii. C. E. B. Cranfield on Mark 9:41–50: "This section illustrates very clearly the way in which in the period before the gospels were written isolated sayings of Jesus were sometimes grouped together according to catchwords to make them more easily memorable." ²⁰
 - iii. Vincent Taylor on Mark 9:33–50: "This explanation [the catchwords hypothesis] might be dismissed as fanciful if a satisfactory account could be given of the order of the several sayings ... But why does 38–40 separate 37 and 42 if its presence is not due to the phrases 'in thy name' and 'in my name', and what bond is there between 37–42, 43–48, 49, and 50 other than the catchwords?" ²¹
 - iv. Martin Dibelius (on the Epistle of James): "[C]ommentators . . . have repeatedly tried to point out a unified arrangement . . . or at least an intentional progression of thought. . . . [L]arge portions of Jas reveal no continuity in thought whatsoever. . . . [but rather] a disorderly change of theme from saying to saying . . . Although there is no continuity in thought in such a string of sayings, there are formal connections. The best known device for an external connection in paraenetic literature is the *catchword*: one saying is attached to another simply because a word or cognate of the same stem appears in both sayings." ²²
 - b. The "hard" catchwords hypothesis (synthesized from the above and other representatives):
 - i. The several units that comprise Mark 9:33–50 were originally independent and do not constitute a unified train of thought.
 - ii. The repeated words are merely formal links between the units, as aids to memory, for example, and are not signals of continuous thought, either of the historical Jesus or the evangelist.
 - iii. English-language analogy: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. The word "courage" itself may be the only link between two successive quotes on the subject. The quotes are quite independent of each other, and there is no continuity of thought from one quote to the other; the word is merely a formal link, not a semantic one.
 - c. The "soft" catchwords hypothesis (represented by, for example, Neiryneck and Fleddermann): the several units were originally independent and thus did not

¹⁹ Schmidt, *Der Rahmen*, 233f.

²⁰ Cranfield, *St. Mark*, 312.

²¹ Taylor, *St. Mark*, 409f.

²² Martin Dibelius, *James*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. Michael A. Williams, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 6f.

constitute a unified train of thought until they were appropriated and edited by the evangelist.

- d. My argument is primarily directed against the “hard” catchwords hypothesis, though I question whether there are good reasons to believe even the “soft” catchwords hypothesis in the particular case of Mark 9:33–50.
2. What catchwords are identified in Mark 9:33–50? A typical list: ὄνομα (vv. 37, 38), σκανδαλίζω (vv. 42, 43), πῦρ (vv. 48, 49), ἀλισθήσεται/ἄλας (vv. 49, 50)
3. The findings of text linguists: repeated words such as the catchwords are signals of continuity of thought
 - a. “Cohesion” is the property of a text in which continuity of thought is carried along from part to part by means of textual features that signal continuity of thought to a reader:
 - i. M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan: “Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it.”²³
 - ii. Michael Hoey: “... in some way the product of semantic relations holding between sentences or propositions.”²⁴
 - iii. Stanley Porter: “... grammatical, semantic and contextual factors which hold a discourse together.”²⁵
 - b. Means of cohesion, according to Halliday and Hasan: reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, lexical cohesion
 - c. Reference
 - i. Exophora: reference to something in the world of the text, not in the text itself
 - ii. Endophora: reference to something in the text itself
 1. Anaphora: reference to something back in the text
 2. Cataphora: reference to something forward in the text
 - d. Lexical cohesion
 - i. Reiteration: repeated words
 - ii. Collocation: words that occur in proximity to each other within a language’s lexico-semantic system. E.g., synonyms (boy, lad); near-synonyms (disease, illness); antonyms (wet, dry); complementaries (boy, girl); superordinates (boy, child); members of ordered series (Monday, Tuesday; dollar, cent); relationships of part-whole, part-part or similar (basement, house; basement, roof); and other relationships difficult to specify (laugh, joke; unwell, physician).
4. Argument for catchwords in Mark 9:33–50
 - a. Appearance of independence

²³ M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976), 4. As is the custom in recent works in text linguistics, Halliday’s and Hasan’s text has certain key words within sentences typeset in small capital letters. Because the cross-referential function this provides within their own work does not apply to this paper, I have typeset my quotations of their and all other similar text linguistic works following the usual rules in English for capitalization.

²⁴ Michael Hoey, *On the Surface of Discourse* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 17.

²⁵ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament, Biblical Languages: Greek* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 304–07.

- i. The units can be understood independently of the rest of the passage.
 - ii. Problems:
 1. Appearance of independence does not imply independence-in-fact.
 2. An intelligible interpretation out-of-context is not necessarily the in-context meaning; e.g., "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (Colossians 2:20) as a slogan for the temperance movement.
 3. *Reductio ad absurdum*: Each of the hand-foot-eye sayings (Mark 9:43, 45, 47) is interpretable independently of the others, but who would argue that they therefore in fact had an origin independent of each other?
 - b. Stylistic or thematic observations
 - i. Hugh Anderson: John's being singled out in 9:38, only here in Mark, probably indicates that his name was already linked with an independent unit.²⁶ The problem, however, is that Anderson offers no warrant to support this assertion.
 - ii. Similar arguments suffer from a similar lack of warrants.
5. Conclusion
- a. If traditional material that eventually made its way into the gospels circulated orally for a period of decades, it is entirely plausible that some independent units could have been formally joined together based on words or phrases in common, for example as an aid to memorization. This seems especially likely in paraenetic material, such as we find in the Epistle of James.
 - b. The problem is how we move from the general possibility that such a thing could have happened to evidence that it happened *in any particular case*. Repeated words and phrases ordinarily expressly do signal continuity of thought, and therefore the catchwords hypothesis is special pleading against any reading that demonstrates continuity of thought.
 - c. The catchwords hypothesis can only be sustained in any particular case if no plausible holistic readings can be discovered. In the case of Mark 9:33–50, I have attempted to offer a plausible holistic reading. The passage relates a continuous train of thought either of Jesus himself on a particular occasion or an author or redactor of the text.
 - d. In addition to a holistic interpretation that recognizes the passage's semantic unity, there are additional literary/rhetorical features of the text that undermine the catchwords hypothesis:
 - i. The inclusio of 9:34 (the argument about greatness), 50 ("be at peace");
 - ii. The close-quarters scene in the house in Capernaum, clearly delimited from the journey through Galilee and the journey to Jerusalem;
 - iii. Jesus' sits in 9:35 then stands in 10:1, enveloping the whole teaching episode;
 - iv. John's abrupt account of the disciples' meeting with the unknown exorcist. The unusual asyndeton connects John's story even more closely with the argument about greatness than would otherwise be the case;

²⁶ Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark*, ed. Matthew Black, *New Century Bible* (London: Oliphants, 1976), 235.

- v. The concentration of circumlocution in 9:38-48;
 - vi. Thematic parallels with first and third passion predictions, in particular the expectation of suffering;
 - vii. The strong cohesive force of 9:42, which refers back to the argument about greatness ("little ones"), builds on the cup of water offered in 9:41 for purposes of contrast, and introduces the "it would be better" sayings of 9:43-48;
 - viii. In light of the above, the hard catchwords hypothesis leaves us with the perplexing question of why a redactor would take such great pains to *conceal* the fact that the units were originally independent and make it appear as though they belong together and represent a continuous train of thought? It seems that the redactor must have detected a coherent train of thought in this passage.
- e. New positive arguments with supporting evidence will be required to sustain the catchwords hypothesis with respect to Mark 9:33-50, and overturning any holistic reading is the necessary first step.

Appendix: The Text of Mark 9:33-50

Mark 9:33 ¶Καὶ ἦλθον εἰς Καφαρναούμ. Καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ γενόμενος ἐπηρώτα αὐτούς· τί ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ διελογίζεσθε;³⁴ οἱ δὲ ἐσιώπων· πρὸς ἀλλήλους γὰρ διελέχθησαν ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ τίς μείζων.³⁵ καὶ καθίσας ἐφώνησεν τοὺς δώδεκα καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· εἴ τις θέλει πρῶτος εἶναι, ἔσται πάντων ἔσχατος καὶ πάντων διάκονος.³⁶ καὶ λαβὼν παιδίον ἔστησεν αὐτὸ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῶν καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὸ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς·³⁷ ὃς ἂν ἐν τῶν τοιούτων παιδίων δέξηται ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐμὲ δέχεται· καὶ ὃς ἂν ἐμὲ δέχεται, οὐκ ἐμὲ δέχεται ἀλλὰ τὸν ἀποστείλαντά με.

³⁸ ¶Ἐφη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰωάννης· διδάσκαλε, εἶδομέν τινα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου ἐκβάλλοντα δαιμόνια καὶ ἐκωλύομεν αὐτόν, ὅτι οὐκ ἠκολούθει ἡμῖν.³⁹ ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· μὴ κωλύετε αὐτόν. οὐδεὶς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὃς ποιήσει δύναμιν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματί μου καὶ δυνήσεται ταχὺ κακολογῆσαί με·⁴⁰ ὃς γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν καθ' ἡμῶν, ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἐστὶν.⁴¹ Ὅς γὰρ ἂν ποτίσῃ ὑμᾶς ποτήριον ὕδατος ἐν ὀνόματι ὅτι Χριστοῦ ἐστε, ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι οὐ μὴ ἀπολέσῃ τὸν μισθὸν αὐτοῦ.⁴² ¶Καὶ ὃς ἂν σκανδαλίσῃ ἓνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων τῶν πιστευόντων [εἰς ἐμέ], καλὸν ἐστὶν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον εἰ περὶκεῖται μύλος ὀνικός περὶ τὸν τράχηλον αὐτοῦ καὶ βέβληται εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν.⁴³ Καὶ ἐὰν σκανδαλίξῃ σε ἡ χεὶρ σου, ἀπόκοψον αὐτήν· καλὸν ἐστὶν σε κυλλὸν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν ἢ τὰς δύο χεῖρας ἔχοντα ἀπελθεῖν εἰς τὴν γέενναν, εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον.⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ καὶ ἐὰν ὁ πούς σου σκανδαλίξῃ σε, ἀπόκοψον αὐτόν· καλὸν ἐστὶν σε εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν χωλὸν ἢ τοὺς δύο πόδας ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν.⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ καὶ ἐὰν ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου σκανδαλίξῃ σε, ἔκβαλε αὐτόν· καλὸν σέ ἐστὶν μονόφθαλμον εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ δύο ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχοντα βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν,⁴⁸ ὅπου ὁ σκώληξ αὐτῶν οὐ τελευτᾷ καὶ τὸ πῦρ οὐ σβέννυται.⁴⁹ Πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἀλισθήσεται.⁵⁰ καλὸν τὸ ἄλας· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἄλας ἄναλον γένηται, ἐν τίνι αὐτὸ ἀρτύσετε; ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἄλα καὶ εἰρηνεύετε ἐν ἀλλήλοις. (BibleWorks)

Mark 9:33 And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?"³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us.⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

⁴² "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." (ESV)

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