Teaching the Most Difficult Text in the 
Gospel of Mark: Mark 9:42–50

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The Gospel of Mark contains puzzling sequences, raising questions about what they mean in themselves and how they function within the narrative as a whole. One of the most puzzling is 9:42–50: “Readers may well feel slightly bewildered after a first glance at these verses.” In this text, Jesus’s words initially warn against “scandalizing” (σκανδαλίζῃ) one of “these little ones” (ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τούτων, v. 42). From that point on “the little ones” are forgotten, and the possible causes of personal sin are challenged. Jesus recommends the violent elimination of parts of the body that “cause you to sin” (σκανδαλίζῃ σε, vv. 43–47). This is followed by a chain of sayings that seem to be linked by the catchwords “fire” and “salt” (vv. 48–50b). Without any immediate warning, Jesus closes the saying with a recommendation to be at peace with one another (v. 50c). The narrative takes another direction in 10:1: “He left that place and went to Judea and beyond the Jordan.” NA prints Mark 9:42–50 as a self-standing literary unit. A majority of commentators also sets it apart from the surrounding narrative, though it forms part of Jesus’s instruction of the disciples across verses 33–50. Among others, Joel Marcus has rightly recognized that the instruction embedded in 9:33–50 is similar to passages that follow each

2. NRSV, tentatively accepting the reading “and” (καί), missing in the Western and Antiochene texts.
3. At this point, a teacher should point out the secondary value of the printed editions of the New Testament and the medieval background to chapters and verses.

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5. In this essay, I presume throughout that the Gospel of Mark was written from and into a believing context, that it was eventually accepted as sacred Scripture in a believing context, and that it has maintained its place because of a community of believers. Today’s classroom, however, may be composed of believing and unbelieving students. The expression “what needs to be known” is deliberate. No one can hope to discover “what can be known.” Students must be made aware of this hermeneutical issue at an early stage of their biblical studies curriculum.

6. The complexity of the passage and the obvious nature of the textual manipulation by copyists make it a very clear example of scribal practices. Both v. 44 and v. 46 in the Textus Receptus are missing from all the major witnesses. They are clearly added by copyists from v. 48 (v. 44) and v. 43 (v. 46). The introduction of “salt” in v. 49, regarded by Marcus as “perhaps the most enigmatic logion of Jesus in the NT” (*Mark 9–16*, 698), also has a disturbed textual tradition. The scholarly commentaries offer helpful information. See, for example, Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 442–43; William L. Lane, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 346–47 n. 76; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34B (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 68–69.
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ones, causes for sin, cutting off); 5:13 (salt); Luke 17:1–2 (causes for sin); and 14:34–35 (salt). I will argue that a text is best illuminated by an eclectic approach that encompasses historical-critical, redactional, literary, and performance approaches. Using Mark 9:42–50 as a test case, I will suggest how an eclectic approach to exegesis can lead students to a discovery of the meaning of a passage, both then and now.

Historical Approaches

Source and Form Criticisms

Those who identify a number of redactional stages and interpolations into that redaction begin by pointing to the wider narrative context. Rudolf Bultmann has suggested that the material originated in some form of pre-Markan instructional catechism on the question of greatness, beginning with the gathering “in the house” at Capernaum in 9:33–35. The passage has been constructed from pre-Markan tradition in the author's attempt to produce rules of piety that distinguished the church from Judaism.

While the details of Bultmann’s theory have been widely rejected, historical critics have accepted his approach to the history of the passage, with variations. Stated simply, Mark has inserted at least three originally independent pre-Markan collections into Jesus’s instruction of his disciples that follows hard on the heels of the second passion prediction (see 9:31). Some suggest an original triad of sayings that were concerned with children (vv. 37, 41, 42), a further triad that dealt with causing sin (vv. 43, 45, 47), a final parable on salt, leading to the command to be at peace with one another (vv. 49–50), and a Markan conclusion that looks back to the contentious silence that immediately followed the passion prediction in verses 33–34.

9. See ibid., 146.
Redaction Criticism

This final remark, that verses 49–50 form a type of “inclusion” with verses 33–34, indicates a turn to redaction criticism.\(^\text{11}\) Depending upon the results of the research that identified traditions that were used to generate the text as we have it today, redaction critics ask a further historical question: what theological agenda (among many possible) led an early Christian author to gather these prior traditions in this way? In our case, why were originally independent sayings gathered together and placed side by side within the literary frame of verses 33–34 and verses 49–50? As one of the founding figures of the approach, Hans Conzelmann, put it: “A variety of sources does not necessarily imply a similar variety in the thought and composition of the author. How did it come about that he brought together these particular materials?”\(^\text{12}\)

Redaction critics strain to uncover the theological perspectives that drove the final composition of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. These are important historical questions and belong to the world behind the text. But a class must be led to understand that the printed text they have before them, generally in their own language, not in the original Greek, came from a real-life situation in the early church. In an eclectic approach, an initial historical investigation is the first stone to be put in place in order to arrive at the more audience-oriented contemporary approaches. We “stand upon the shoulders” of those who went before us.

Literary Approaches

Narrative Criticism

Without disregarding the historical background that must be understood for an appreciation of the story, a narrative commentary attempts to trace the intended impact of that story upon its readers. This reading and interpretive process attempts to uncover the literary structure of the narrative as a whole and traces the unfolding of the narrative, allowing it to speak for itself. The interpretation of difficult texts like Mark 9:42–50 must be

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determined by the narrative as a whole. Keys for unlocking interpretation are found within the narrative. Readings that focus upon the flow of the narrative must always consider the longer story. The Gospel of Mark begins with a prologue (1:1–13) and ends with an epilogue (16:1–8). Mark 1:14–15:42 contains two major narrative developments that deal, in the first place, with the question that surrounds the person of Jesus (1:14–8:30), followed by the Markan response to the question. Jesus is presented as the crucified and risen Son of Man, the Christ, and the Son of God (8:31–15:47). Mark 9:42–50 is located in a section of 8:31–10:52 that focuses intensely upon what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Set between two miracles where a blind man is cured (8:22–26; 10:46–52) and dominated by Jesus’s three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:32–34), the same literary pattern is repeated three times. It can be summarized as follows:

**8:31–9:29: Passion prediction (8:31).** The disciples cannot or will not accept Jesus’s self-revelation as the suffering and vindicated Son of Man (vv. 32–33), and Jesus instructs his failing disciples on the cost of discipleship (8:34–9:29: the cross).

**9:30–10:31: Passion prediction (9:30–31).** The disciples cannot or will not accept Jesus’s self-revelation as the suffering and vindicated Son of Man (vv. 32–34), and Jesus instructs his failing disciples on the cost of discipleship (9:35–10:31: service).

**10:32–10:45: Passion prediction (10:32–34).** The disciples cannot or will not accept Jesus’s self-revelation as the suffering and vindicated Son of Man (10:35–37; see also v. 41), and Jesus instructs his failing disciples on the cost of discipleship (10:38–40; see also vv. 42–44: the cross and service).

Closing this threefold development of Markan Christology and its subsequent idea of discipleship, one finds “one of the most important”

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13. For what follows, see Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 16–22. These pages attempt to uncover the plot of the Gospel of Mark on the basis of markers within the text itself and then develop a literary structure that best carries that plot.

14. This division accepts that the original Gospel closed at 16:8. See further ibid., 354–62.

sayings in the Gospel, summarizing 8:31–10:44: “For the Son of Man also came, not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). A classroom exposed to this section of the Gospel of Mark can be called upon to share their experience of revelation, failure, and Jesus’s ongoing teaching and accompanying presence. Whatever the history of the passage, it can be taught as a narrative expression of age-old Christian experiences.

Contemporary postmodern critics have rightly insisted that an interpreter take into account his or her particular social and religious “location.” They necessarily impose limitations upon any teacher who can do no more than communicate her or his interpretation. Humility should be a key virtue for any interpreter of ancient texts. Belief that the Gospel of Mark is part of the Christian “sacred Scriptures” presupposes that this story made an impact in their original setting and telling (or performing) in the life of the church. A narrative interpretation attempts to uncover a communication process that has gone on between writers/tellers and readers/listeners across the Christian centuries.

A Narrative Interpretation of Mark 9:42–50

Within the thrice-repeated literary pattern of passion prediction, failure, and teaching, 9:42–50 forms part of the “teaching” section that follows hard on the heels of the second passion prediction (9:31), the disciples’ lack of understanding and fear (v. 32), and their weak responses to Jesus’s self-revelation (see vv. 33–34; v. 38). Essential for the narrative interpretation of verses 42–50 are the indications of verses 33–34. On arrival at Capernaum, when Jesus asks what they were discussing on the way: “they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another [πρὸς ἀλλήλους γὰρ διελέχθεσαν] who was the greatest” (v. 34). In verse 35, Jesus adopts the position of a teacher (“he sat down, called the twelve, and said to them”) and begins to instruct them on the greatness of service. In verses 36–37,

he uses the image of a child to teach the disciples the need for service and receptivity. This is immediately followed by John’s witness to the lack of service and receptivity among the Twelve, who reject an exorcist “because he was not following us” (v. 38). This passage features sayings linked by the catchphrase “in my name” (vv. 39, 41). They are wrong to insist that the exorcist must follow them (v. 38), since he is acting in the name of Jesus.

Within this broader setting, the noun changes from “child” to “little one,” but Jesus’s words on receiving “one such child” (v. 37) become a threat in verse 42.19 Jesus warns his disciples: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me [ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν τῶν πιστεύοντων εἰς ἐμέ] to sin.” The argument is ongoing.20 John’s remarks and Jesus’s answer raise an issue concerning those who belong to Jesus, and the community that “bears the name of Christ” in verses 38–41 (see esp. v. 41) determines the storyteller’s use of earlier traditions to continue his presentation of Jesus’s teaching. This passage is a collection of originally independent sayings from pre-Markan tradition, gathered on the basis of two principles. The first of these principles is the problem of sin within the community, the theme stated in verse 42a. People who considered themselves “great” (see v. 34) may not concern themselves overly with “the little ones” (v. 42). Such people would be better eliminated from the community. The image of the millstone around the neck of such a person cast into the sea speaks eloquently of total annihilation, a practice used in antiquity (v. 42b).21 If a violent death by drowning, with a millstone attached to the neck to assure death, is better (καλόν ἐστιν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον) than giving scandal, one can only imagine how devastating would be the punishment for causing a member of the community to sin. The use of the verb σκανδαλίζω in verse 42 brings

19. For what follows on 9:42–50, see Moloney, Gospel of Mark, 190–92.
20. An important exegetical decision is called for in interpreting the change from “child” (vv. 36–37: παιδίον) to “one of these little ones” (v. 42: ἕνα τῶν μικρῶν) as a continuation of Jesus’s use of children (see Evans, Mark, 70) or as a change of direction in the argument, with the “little ones” being “a reference to Christians, perhaps again Christian missionaries” (Marcus, Mark 9–16, 695). The ongoing nature of the argument from 9:33–50 points to the former as the most likely meaning. However, the overall argument of 9:31–10:30 raises the possibility that all the innocent and frail members of the community are indicated.
21. This form of execution is taken from Roman practice and was not unknown among the Jews. Thus we see the importance of “history,” even in literary interpretations. See Marie-Joseph Lagrange, Évangile selon Saint Marc, EBib (Paris: Gabalda, 1920), 234–35.
into play the second generative principle in this passage: link-words. This literary process was already part of the author’s technique in the immediately previous verses 38–41.22

From the “causing to sin” (σκανδαλίσῃ) in verse 42, the author uses the same verb to consider other parts of the body, the hand (v. 43), the foot (v. 45), and the eye (v. 47), which might lead a believer to sin (σκανδαλίζῃ). If a part of the body causes sin (vv. 43, 45, 47: σκανδαλίζῃ), then it is to be cut off and cast away. One is better to enter life maimed than to go to the unquenchable fire of hell. These demands are regularly explained as Semitic hyperbole—cutting off hand and foot, plucking out the eye—but this is not the case.23 The teacher should point out that Jesus’s words mean what they say. They teach the unsurpassable blessings available in the kingdom. “God is even more important than the most important parts of our body.”24 It is better (καλόν ἐστιν σε) to be without a hand, a foot, or an eye, than to lose the opportunity to enter the life of God’s kingdom.25 This point can only be appreciated when one takes into account that women and men normally have two hands, two feet, and two eyes. One can do without a hand, a foot or an eye; but one cannot do without the gift of life in the kingdom. To have both hands, both eyes, and both feet, but to have allowed them to lead you into sin and death, forever in the unquenchable fire of hell, is unthinkable for the Markan Jesus. The classroom situation can be used to generate a realistic understanding of this Christian truth. This would be especially true in a classroom that had experience of people with physical incapacities who are able to function quite well.

22. Some commentators link v. 42 with vv. 38–41, but the link generated by σκανδαλίζω locates it firmly as the opening statement in vv. 42–50. There is also a reprise of the call for oneness in v. 50, recalling the necessary care for the “little ones” in v. 42. For an even more extensive suggestion of “link-words” across vv. 33–50, see Marcus, Mark 9–16, 672–73.


25. In vv. 43 and 45, Jesus speaks of entering “life,” while in v. 47 he speaks of entering “the kingdom of God.” For Mark they are the same, although Mark indicates the richness of “life in the kingdom” by using both expressions. See Dale C. Allison Jr., Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 168–90.
The extreme measure of cutting off and plucking out attests to the unparalleled richness of the life offered to those “little ones who believe in Jesus” (see v. 42). Whatever these sayings may have meant originally, in their present context they refer to sin that brings scandal and further sin into the community. This meaning is determined by the introduction, verse 42, where causing the little ones who believe in Jesus to sin is the theme. The same message is taken up in the conclusion of verses 49–50, where living in peace with one another is stressed, returning to the theme of the tense and conflictual silence among the disciples concerning who was the greatest in verses 33–34.

A description of Gehenna closes the rhetoric of verses 43–47, dominated by the possibility of the choice of entering the kingdom maimed, or the never-ending pains of Gehenna physically intact (see already v. 43). Mark cites Isa 66:24: “where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (v. 48). These words lead the author to link other originally independent sayings. The word fire (πῦρ) in the citation of Isaiah leads to the addition of a further saying: “For everyone will be salted with fire [πῦρ]” (v. 49). The word salted in verse 49 (ἁλισθήσεται) leads to a four-fold play on “salt” in verse 50 (ἄλας, ἅλας, ἄναλον, ἅλα). Salt was a most widespread precious commodity in antiquity, giving ongoing life and flavor to food. We are again dealing with a past reality that has an impact upon a present reading in the hands of a good teacher. In our own time, salt is an essential ingredient to so many foods and even to drinks. Once it is in food and drink, it permeates everything and cannot be removed. Such is the comprehensive presence of “fire,” which, in contrast to salt that enlivens, destroys entirely.

26. The sayings are therefore a strong affirmation of the life offered by following Jesus, cost what it may. Commentators rightly see the link with 8:34–9:1.
27. For this case, see Allison, Constructing Jesus, 186–88.
28. The use of the verb διαλογίζομαι in v. 34 carries the meaning of “arguing” among themselves. See BDAG, 232, s.v. διαλογίζομαι.
29. “Gehenna” was the name given to a valley to the southwest of Jerusalem where human sacrifices had been offered to the gods Moloch and Baal. After the reform of Josiah (see 1 Kgs 23:10), it became the city rubbish dump, where fires burned continually.
30. This enigmatic saying, which crosses from the punishing fire to the blessing of salt, has a complicated textual history. For the discussion, and the establishment of the above text, see Charles E. B. Cranfield, The Gospel according to St Mark, CGTC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 314–15.
The threatening image of the penetrating and destroying fire of Gehenna (v. 49) has been transferred to refer to the life-giving uniqueness of the believers. The move from the destructive power of fire to salt as a source of life may run the danger of overmixing metaphors; but, paradoxically, it gives unity to the message. Like fire, salt is an agent of purification (Ezek 16:4; 43:24); it can also bring desolation and destruction (Judg 9:45; Zeph 2:9). But unlike fire, salt is a source of life (2 Kgs 2:19–22); it can be used to preserve food from putrefaction. However mixed the metaphor, the idea that people can be salted with fire sums up exactly the message of verses 43, 45, and 47: the purificatory process may destroy, but it can also preserve.31

Having salt in themselves, believers are penetrated by belief in God and openness God’s ways (v. 50).32 Once this salt, which gives sense and flavor to the believer’s commitment to follow the way of Jesus, is lost, nothing can replace it. Whether this happens or how it might happen is irrelevant;33 the image retains its power, as one cannot imagine what a salted object might be like without its saltiness. “An image of communal harmony (‘be at peace with one another’) is counterposed to the portrait of lonely horror.”34

Integration: History, Redaction, Narrative

By the conclusion of the second major step in an eclectic approach to Mark 9:42–50, students are aware that a collection of originally independent sayings is drawn together in concluding words that could lay claim to motivating the whole of verses 33–50. Having salt, the driving force that makes sense of Christian life and gives it flavor, is described as being at peace with one another (v. 50b). The issue that opened these sayings returns, the demand that none of the little ones who believes in Jesus be led into sin

31. Hooker, Mark, 233.
32. The καί, linking having salt and being at peace, indicates consequence: “have salt in yourselves, and then you will be at peace among yourselves.” See Ernst Lohmeyer, Das Evangelium des Markus, 17th ed., Meyers Kommentar (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 197; Taylor, Mark, 414.
33. See Hooker, Mark, 233. She regards the discussions about salt losing its taste as “pedantic.” For a contrary view, reading the combined use of salt and fire as powerful eschatological language, with its roots in the wisdom tradition, see Marcus, Mark 9–16, 698–99.
34. Marcus, Mark 9–16, 699.
This theme, in turn, looks back to Jesus’s criticism of John’s description of the divisive practices of the Twelve that would never produce peace (vv. 38–41). The storyteller has used this complex gathering of traditions and somewhat bewildering linking of images by means of catchwords and catchphrases to expand further upon Jesus’s teaching to the Twelve, after their initial failure (vv. 32–34) and their continued arrogance (v. 38).

By now the classroom is aware that Mark had concerns for the original audience of this story of Jesus, who wondered about authority and care for the more fragile members of the community. Mark’s concerns remain within any single Christian community and the Christian community as a whole. Disciples are to be the least of all and the servants of all, like children themselves, receptive to the least of all (vv. 35–37), never judging anyone who works in the name of Jesus (vv. 38–41), never endangering the faith of even the most fragile (vv. 42–50). They are to be at peace with one another in the kingdom (v. 50). Disciples, including the students in the classroom, are called to receive Jesus and the one who sent him (vv. 35–37).

Performance Criticism

This contemporary approach to biblical narratives has gained a great deal of ground in recent Gospel scholarship in the United States of America. For a number of reasons (for example, the immediacy of the Markan narrative [everything happens “immediately”] and the brevity of the story that makes it easier to commit to memory) the Gospel of Mark has proved to be the most used text in this emerging discipline. Performance criticism

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attempts to appreciate the intellectual and emotional response from the audience. In this respect, it is more radically oriented to “hearers and viewers” than narrative criticism, which depends upon “reading” a written text for its impact. The close, direct relationship that a skilled performer can create between him- or herself and the audience is clearly witnessed by the gasps, laughter, and other responses that one can hear in filmed versions of good performances.38

This is not the place to debate the possibilities of the long-term scholarly contribution of performance criticism.39 The obvious problem is the “objectivity” of the interpretation of the performer. In a scholarly tradition that was born in a post-Enlightenment world determined to establish objective criteria for “truth” in every aspect of human thought and activity, a performance that generates emotional reaction from an audience on the basis of the interpretive and dramatic skills of an actor will be regarded as suspect.40 This may create less of a problem if we take more seriously the fact that many of the biblical traditions, and perhaps especially the Jesus story, originated in an oral context. Moreover, a teacher can link the text with its past by employing performance in the classroom.

Approximately 5 percent of the population of the first century was literate.41 Even the form critics recognized this, but the scholars of that time, especially in Germany, “were unable to disentangle themselves from

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38. For example, performances are available on DVD by David Rhoads, A Dramatic Presentation of the Gospel of Mark (1992); and Philip Ruge-Jones, The Beginning of the Good News (2009), available for purchase from Select Learning, http://www.selectlearning.org/.


40. Theorists and practitioners of performance criticism, products of the postmodern era, are not troubled by this classical objection. As Philip Ruge-Jones puts it: “every performance is an original and no single, pristine specimen ever existed. Rather these disciples can aid in the construction of credible performance scenarios that are generative in understanding the multiplicity of ways the narrative may have made an impact in the ancient world” (“Orality Studies and Oral Tradition: New Testament,” in McKenzie, Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, 2:70.

a literary mindset."42 Things are different now, but the question arises as to whether we are better served by sharing in "performances" of the whole text, which is the majority approach, or by mapping issues in the Gospel narrative as we have it that point to the world of orality and tracing there something of the learning experience that cannot be captured on the printed page. These options are not mutually exclusive. The following reflections accept the primacy of the oral transmission of the Jesus story and test how the "oral performance" of one of its component parts (Mark 9:42–50) might impact upon the players and their audience in a classroom. It will also indicate, however, that performance can enhance the classroom's awareness of the results of the earlier historical and literary approaches to the text.43 For the purposes of this study, the classroom, already possessed of such awareness, is the place of the performance, and the students are the players.

A particular aspect of oral transmission of narrative that can enrich the interpretation of Mark 9:42–50 calls for attention: the relationship between the narrator and the audience. To this point, the students in the classroom will have encountered a written text on a page, an essential element to the interpretive processes. In an oral transmission, however, there is no printed text. The narrator is "in your face," speaking directly to the hearers, looking them in the eye, judging their response (approval, joy, horror, fear, disappointment, expectation) as she or he tells the story. The narrator, although not a character in the story, assumes the role of a character and is thus the major player in the communication of the story. This immediacy creates an element essential to a performance by eliminating the "time" element central to a report from the past in a written text. As Kelly Iverson has pointed out:

Although in any given performance off-stage time and stage time may refer to temporal periods that are chronologically distant, the temporal dimensions converge in the oral arena. Despite the temporal distinctiveness of the narrative and performance worlds, the "liveness" of performance fuses the horizons, transforming the audience's perception

42. Iverson, "Performance Criticism," 97.
43. In order not to overburden the text of this essay, the mutuality across the different methods will be indicated in footnotes. Despite their appearance in the footnotes, however, these indications are an important part of the overall argument of the essay.
of the drama. Because the story unfolds in the direct spatio-physical presence of the audience and performer, the relative distance between events and discourse is compressed. This proximity has the effect of seamlessly converging the off-stage and stage times so as to thrust forward (or backward) the world of the narrative into the world of the performance.\textsuperscript{44}

This process of rendering the past world of the narrative "present" to the audience in a performance adds considerable vigor to an understanding of Mark 9:42–50.

Aspects of a Performance of Mark 9:42–50 in a Classroom

The “wholeness” of a narrative teaches that the performance of Mark 9:42–50 must be part of the performance of what precedes and follows this instruction over a series of class meetings. But there are obvious “breathing moments” in any performance, and the moments that circumscribe this passage are the passion prediction in 9:31 that opens Jesus’s instruction of his disciples and the further passion prediction, introduced at length by a description of Jesus and the disciples on their journey to Jerusalem in 10:32–34. This lengthy resumption of the brief prediction in 9:31 introduces the episodes that lead to arrival in Jerusalem (11:1). To use the language of theater, the students in the classroom, with the teacher acting as director, might enact 9:31–10:31 as one of three "scenes" played out within the "act" of 8:22–10:42. The others are 8:22–9:30 and 10:32–52. Together they form an act entitled: “Jesus on the way to Jerusalem with his disciples” (8:22–10:52).\textsuperscript{45}

However, the performer faces a further challenge in the scene of 9:31–10:31. Only here in the whole “act” of 8:22–10:42 (with the exception of the two blind men who mark the opening and closing of the act [8:22–26; 10:46–52]), characters other than Jesus and the disciples appear. This is an


\textsuperscript{45} The “breathing moments” provided by the passion predictions in 9:31 and 10:32–34; the role of 9:31–10:31 as a “scene” within an “act” made up of 8:22–10:52, come to the performers from prior awareness of both historical and literary interpretations.
important feature of the drama that the performing students must negotiate in light of their earlier exposure to the historical and literary analyses of the text. Although the role of Jesus, whose words dominate the passage, must be central, the rest of the class is involved, providing “reactions” from the disciples not found in the written text. This observation raises the point that student performers must negotiate a number of challenges, from the ambiguity of the text to the participation of the audience. Below I discuss a number of challenges that performers might face in playing the scene of 9:31–10:31.

The Presence of Children

Children appear in 9:31–41 (see vv. 36–37) and in 10:1–31 (vv. 13–16) in such a way that leads the students into and out of their enactment of 9:42–50 (see the reference to children in v. 42). Aware of the narrative links between 9:31–41 and 10:1–31 with 9:42–50 from their literary analysis, the student audience accepts the same gestures to indicate that the children, and Jesus’s affection for them is an important feature of this scene in the performance. Once the performing student repeats the gestures used for 9:35–37 in verse 42, the presentation of Jesus and the children in 10:13–16 repeats identical gestures. In this way, what has been performed in 9:32–50, highlighting Jesus’s affection for the children, casts a shadow over the performance of Jesus’s discussion of divorce with the Pharisees and his subsequent teaching to the disciples “in the house” (10:1–12) and over his encounter with the rich man and his subsequent teaching to the disciples (10:13–31).

46. The entrance of two unexpected “characters” into 10:1–31 is something that has been noticed by the redaction critics, and especially the narrative critics, for whom “character” is a particular concern. The stimulating essay in this volume by Richard Swanson, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Performance, Pedagogy, and Mark 15,” introduces an element that would impact considerably upon such a performance: the use of multiple characters.

47. As we have seen, the association of v. 42 with “the children” of vv. 35–36 and the relationship between vv. 35–36 with 10:13–16 was a feature of Bultmann’s work on the history of the tradition. Literary and performance criticism can build upon these associations. Another obvious link with traditional exegesis is the decision that “the children” of 9:35–36 and 10:13–16 are to be associated with “the little ones” of v. 42. See above, n. 25. As we will see, this decision is important for a performance.
Especially important for this “shadowing” is the gesture of embracing in 9:36 and 10:16, used to indicate an invitation to the audience about the importance of “receiving” Jesus and belonging to the kingdom of God (9:36–37; 10:14–16). Neither the Pharisees nor the rich man are able to “receive” in this way. “The force of the argument is that the rich who cannot let go of their security in goods have already lost the security of God's kingdom where the children are at home.”

This element of the performance also adds gentleness and a demonstration of affection to the instruction of disciples that throws into relief and contextualizes the violent acts performed in verses 42b, 43–47. The classroom of “disciples” recognizes the sharp contrast between warmth and affection through the performance of the sullen silence of verses 33–34. This contrast motivates the performance of Jesus's request that those gathered for the performance “be at peace with one another” (v. 50). As the world of the narrative and the world of the audience have converged in the performance (Iverson), a classroom of disciples that acts out and responds to the performance are instructed on the need for service and receptivity. One would hope that they nod approval.

The role of the children makes a major dramatic impact on the classroom in the performance of scenes that indicate arrogance (9:38–41), sinfulness and causing to sin (vv. 42–47), and the rejection of Jesus's invitation (10:1–9, 17–22). It also serves as a key to Jesus's explicit instruction of his disciples in 9:35, 50; 10:10–12, 23–31. By bringing the contrast between warmth and affection to life in the classroom, the performance overcomes the temporal distance between the past episodes of the written text and the present situation of the audience.

The Location in the House

A further aspect of the performance that generates a close relationship between the student performers and the classroom audience is the regular reminder that they are sharing in a discussion between Jesus and his disci-

49. A performance that plays out Jesus's consistent affection for the children (9:36; 10:16), his defense of them (9:42; 10:14), and his use of them to instruct on “reception” and entering into life and the kingdom of God (9:37; 10:14–15) also makes a christological point about the coherence of the person of Jesus. His response to children is consistent, and through them he points with authority to the kingdom of God.
ple that takes place in “the house” (9:33). This is an important historical-, redactional-, and narrative-critical issue, since Mark uses “the house” elsewhere as the location for Jesus’s instruction of his disciples (see 7:17; 9:28). But Mark also uses it in the domestic sense of a place where a person lives (see 2:1, 11; 3:20; 5:19, 38; 7:30; 8:3, 26). The setting for 9:33–50, including the report from John on the disciples’ arrogant rejection of the unknown exorcist (vv. 38–41), is “in the house” (v. 33). A performing student has earlier shown that Jesus has been regarded as insane by the family of his “house,” another group students in the classroom (3:20–21). The student performing Jesus has turned away from “his own family,” created a “new family” who will be “with him” (3:14–19), and indicated that the brother, sister, and mother of Jesus is one who “does the will of God” (3:31–35). In performing 7:17 and 9:28, the student performer has shown her or his colleagues in the classroom that the “house” Jesus uses for the instruction of his disciples is a “new place,” quite unlike anything else the disciples (the students in the classroom) have experienced.

Their earlier experience of a discussion between the new family of Jesus (see 3:13–14) that no longer follows the accepted codes for family (see 3:35–37) has led to their awareness that there is another “house,” where Jesus is “with his disciples” (see 3:14; 7:17; 9:28, 33). This is a different “house” than the culturally accepted domestic household. As the performance of the scene of 9:31–10:31 comes to closure, the theme of a “house” returns. The Jesus figure instructs his followers in the classroom that to be part of Jesus’s household, they must be prepared to abandon any comfortable experience of house and family (see 10:29–31). This may be especially challenging for anyone who comes from a stable family or traditional “household.”

50. As we have seen, this was important for Bultmann’s identification of the passage as a type of catechism on piety that separated the church from Judaism.

51. This would be an important moment for a performer and depends upon what she or he makes of the exegesis of ὁι παρ′ αὐτοῦ and the verb ἐξέστη in 3:21. The position taken above is that the former refers to his family, and the latter indicates that they thought he had “gone out of his mind.” Both are rendered as such in the NRSV. See also Moloney, *Gospel of Mark*, 80–82. An awareness of traditional critical methods is required for a good performance.

The Violent Images

Especially powerful in a performance of this text are the violent and even angry gestures of casting into the sea with a great millstone hung around one's neck (v. 42) and the cutting off of hand, foot, and eye (vv. 43–47). The Jesus performer can generate gestures that point to the Markan meaning of this passage, drawing that meaning into the “now” of the participating audience. In the case of anyone who causes little ones to sin, death through drowning—accompanied by the gesture of pushing a heavily laden object over a cliff—indicates that there is no place in a believing audience for the one who has breached the embrace between Jesus and the children (v. 37). An initial response of the class might be a gasp. But the loss of one hand, one foot, or one eye can be performed in such a way that indicates that a hand, a foot, and an eye remain in place. The performer balances the gestures of cutting off and casting away parts of his or her body with the equally important positive gesture that he or she still has a hand, and eye, and a foot. This is all one needs to “enter life” (vv. 43, 45), that is, enter the kingdom of God (v. 47). Such gestures may generate a sense of relief and comfort in the classroom.

The performer can show the positive result of such violent action to lead a classroom to recover from an initial shock that the violent gesture of cutting off generates and to tell the audience of the fundamental importance of the life that is to be had from God’s gift of the kingdom. The threefold repetition of these contrasting gestures, performed deliberately and slowly, each time concluding with an indication of the remaining one hand, one eye, and one foot that one takes into the life of the kingdom, generates an impression. The classroom not only learns but experiences that all is not lost; indeed, the only thing that is important is gained. The destruction by drowning of the one who causes scandal of verse 37 is mitigated by the promise of life in the kingdom to those who sin but are instructed on the way to avoid such sin. The message is positive, even though by means of

53. In the discussion of this paper at the International Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Vienna, Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi suggested that a humorous note could also be added to the performance of tying a large weight around the neck of an offender. He rightly indicated that there are “many” performances possible. See above, n. 48. However, I would argue that “any” performance is not acceptable. See above, n. 4. I would argue that the interpretive tradition should play a role in determining the “many,” and excluding others.
the performance of verses 43–47 the classroom is warned that they may have to pay a hefty price for it. The performer asks, what do you prefer, total elimination because you cause others to sin (v. 42) or life and the kingdom by sacrificing something you may regard as precious but that is not essential (vv. 43–47)? Performing a text from the past, this question is asked of the classroom audience now.

Ambiguous Metaphors

The final association between hellfire that salts those who choose to retain two hands, feet, and eyes (vv. 48–49) can be highlighted by the text’s use of the image of a never-dying worm that weaves its way through the innards of the person in question. The student-performer simulates “worming” as a negative permeation of fire that could make a powerful, perhaps comical, and even sinister, negative impact upon the class. Again, following Mark’s narrative, she or he can turn this into a positive image, as the destructive salting of the condemned turns into the permeating goodness of the salt that does not lose its flavor (v. 50a). By playing on the negative and positive use of “salt” and “saltiness,” making a feature of the steady repetition of the word salt across verses 49–50a, the classroom is not surprisingly faced with the challenging punch line of this brief performance, so dominated by opposites: violent death versus life in the kingdom; severed bodily member versus those that remain intact; hell versus the kingdom; insipid salt versus salt that produces peace with others.54

Jesus’s Sayings and the Larger Context

The classroom has witnessed a performance of the disciples’ silence and division when Jesus asks them what they have been discussing on the way to Capernaum (vv. 33–34). They are now aware that this sullen silence is the loss of saltiness; their discipleship no longer has taste or value. This must be reversed, as is obvious from the location of these words in a performance that follows immediately upon Jesus’s “teaching his disciples” of his forthcoming death and resurrection (v. 31). The well-instructed

54. The dilemma for some historical critics, that there is no such thing as salt without flavor, could even play into a performance, as surprise could be manifested that the impossible has happened. Things are different in the world imagined and taught by Jesus, then and now.
student-performer makes the audience aware that insipid salt is not what Jesus seeks from them. Indeed, they are warned that such a response to Jesus will lead to their being “salted with fire” (v. 49). Jesus, the performer, communicates that there is no place in this classroom for discussions over greatness (vv. 34–35) by taking little children into his arms to show that service and receptivity are the marks of the true disciple (vv. 36–37). But arrogance continues among the performers (vv. 38–41), so a member of the class instructs fellow students in the audience on the avoidance of actions that generate sin in others and in themselves (vv. 42–47). There are radical remedies for these problems, and they produce life, the gift of the kingdom, and disciples of quality (vv. 43–50a). Jesus, the performer, instructs the classroom: “Be at peace with one another” (v. 50b), having instructed them on the price of that peace.

Conclusion

Anyone teaching Mark 9:42–50 might justifiably ask: why am I bothering with this text? So many other more interesting, and certainly less convoluted, literary productions that deal with Christian discipleship are available, both ancient and modern. The obvious response is that the teacher and the class regard this passage as part of its accepted sacred Scripture. The Gospel of Mark has come down to us read within Christian history and its faith tradition. Recent scholarship has affirmed that “‘canonicity’ lies in the progressive and mutually forming relationship between certain texts and the Church: a relationship which is complex, historical, but not beyond the bounds of grace.”

55 We ignore this at great risk as we pass on the serious analysis of biblical texts from our generation to the next.

I suggest that a teacher ask questions that lead from the origins of a text down to its contemporary appropriation and reception, as in the following examples.

Questions for an Eclectic Approach to a Biblical Text

1. What are the historical origins of this passage?
2. Do we have an assured original Greek text?

3. How did the text being taught assume its somewhat puzzling present form, and are there other places in the New Testament where these supposed “sayings of Jesus” are found (e.g., Matt 5:13; 18:6–9; Luke 14:34–35; 17:1–2)?

4. Do these other New Testament locations enlighten our understanding of Mark 9:42–50?

5. Does this passage add anything to our understanding of Mark the theologian?

6. Where does this passage come within the overall theological and literary unfolding of the Markan narrative?

7. Does the narrative of the Gospel of Mark as a whole throw light on the meaning of 9:42–50?

8. Does the final step into a performance staged with students shaped by their historical-critical and narrative-critical investigations generate spontaneity?

9. Does the performance impinge intellectually and emotionally on the audience in the classroom?

10. Do the words of Jesus articulated in Mark 9:42–50 add anything to a contemporary appreciation and practice of Christian discipleship? The test of the value of the eclectic approach advocated here is authentic performance of the text as it is lived out in a Christian community.

It is intellectually dishonest to use a text we regard as sacred Scripture without asking something akin to these questions. What I have proposed might serve as a paradigm for the teaching of any such text within the classroom. The Gospel of Mark had its origins in an original and originating experience of Jesus. As already indicated, Wire (Case for Mark) has argued the unlikely scenario that Mark is an orally composed tradition, told by several storytellers over a period of time.

56. As already indicated, Wire (Case for Mark) has argued the unlikely scenario that Mark is an orally composed tradition, told by several storytellers over a period of time.

57. In making this affirmation, I disagree with Wire’s suggestion that Mark was “composed” in performance. Hurtado recognizes that Mark “seems to preserve features of an oral ‘register’ (e.g., frequent use of καί), and that may well have been a choice by the author, precisely in order to give the text a certain storytelling ‘air’” (“Oral Fixation,” 339), but he continues: “there is no Roman-era example of such an extended prose literary text composed in ‘performance,’ and no basis for positing that Mark was so composed” (340).
was produced, it would have been generally communicated orally. It was most likely read and perhaps performed for a population that neither read nor wrote.

From our location, however, the Gospel of Mark has been used predominantly as written text for two thousand years, generating a long tradition of remarkable, and at times beautifully presented, manuscripts. From the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (ca. 1449), it has been widely dispersed as a book. Translations that challenged the Latin Vulgate became a matter of crucial importance in the sixteenth-century European Reformation. Confessional differences still play a role in contemporary versions. These developments, with their contrasts, similarities, and mutual enrichment, should be taught as a newer generation learns a relevant interpretive process. Ignorance of the past produces shallow answers to the questions of the present.

The teaching of ancient texts requires many skills, ranging from those of the historian to the sensitive performer. Most importantly, however, responses to questions that focus upon reception (8–10) must be the fruit of a long process (1–7). They cannot be answered honestly without responses to the historical, redactional, and narrative-critical questions that preceded them.

I chose the text considered in this essay, Mark 9:42–50, because of its complexity at every stage: its historical origins, its transmission, its theological and literary reception, and its performance. If an eclectic teaching process enables us to communicate the meaning of the most difficult text in Mark, it could prove to be a helpful pedagogical tool to approach all texts, most of which are not so complex.