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Making Oneself Last in the Community: Mark 9.43–7 in its Context and Co-Text

Francesco Filannino 

Pontifical Lateran University, Rome, Italy
Email: filafra88@libero.it

Abstract

After reviewing and offering a critical evaluation of the main interpretations of the sayings in Mark 9.43–7, the paper proposes a new reading that considers them in the Jewish context and in their co-text (Mark 9.33–50). The context is the marginal condition in which physically impaired people lived in Jewish society and communities. In view of this context, it is possible to point out the consistency of Jesus' *logia* on self-maiming in order to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 9.43–7) with their co-text. The disciples are urged not only not to scandalise the little ones of the community (Mark 9.42), but also to share their minority state, thus avoiding stumbling in their own discipleship because of claims of greatness and superiority.

Keywords: Mark 9.43–7; scandal; kingdom of God; discipleship; self-maiming

1. Introduction

In the Gospel of Mark, the *logia* in which Jesus states that it is preferable to renounce a member of the body (hand, foot, eye) in order to enter into life or into the kingdom of God and not to end up in Gehenna (Mark 9.43–7) are contained in a broader section, which reports various teachings of Jesus to the Twelve, pronounced at home in Capernaum (Mark 9.33–50). The composite nature of this section has long been highlighted by critics: originally it was different material, collected by a redactor prior to Mark or by the evangelist himself, for catechetical purposes and/or for easier memorisation.¹ According to most scholars, these sayings were not assembled based on a criterion of content, but because of catchwords: ὄνομα (vv. 37, 38, 39, 41), βάλλω, σκανδαλίζω and

¹ In favour of the existence of a pre-Markan 'community catechism', which the evangelist would have only slightly modified, are R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1931²) 160–1; J. Sundwall, *Die Zusammensetzung des Markusevangeliums* (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1934) 60–3; V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1966²) 408–9. Other authors emphasise the redactional role of Mark: R. Schnackenburg, 'Mc 9,33–50', *Synoptischen Studien* (ed. P. Benoit; München: Zink, 1953) 197; K.-G. Reploh, *Markus - Lehrer der Gemeinde: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Jüngerperikopen des Markus-Evangeliums* (SBM 9; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969) 140–56; H. W. Kuhn, *Ältere Sammlungen im Markusevangelium* (SUNT 8; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 32–6; A. Ambrozic, *The Hidden Kingdom: A Redactional-Critical Study of the References to the Kingdom of God in Mark's Gospel* (CBQMS 2; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1972) 172–4; R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium* (2 Vols.; HThKNT 2; Freiburg: Herder, 1977–1980²) II.113; H. Fleddermann, 'The Discipleship Discourse (Mark 9:33–50)', *CBQ* 43 (1981) 58. Also C. Focant, *L'Évangile selon Marc* (Paris: Cerf, 2004) 368; R. H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 441 recognise the composite nature of Mark 9.33–50.

καλόν ἐστιν (vv. 42, 43, 45, 47), πῦρ (vv. 43, 48, 49), ἀλίζω/ἄλας (vv. 49, 50). The sayings about the maiming of a member of the body (vv. 43–7) form a compact unit, coming from tradition and likely going back to Jesus. The vocabulary of these *logia* supports this hypothesis: they contain Semitic terms and expressions, such as γέεννα and καλόν ἐστιν in a comparative sense (in Hebrew and Aramaic, the comparative does not have a specific formulation, but is constructed with the adjective of positive degree followed by ׀). The arrangement of these sayings according to synonymic parallelism also suggests their Semitic origin. Moreover, if Matthew depends on the Markan text in reporting these sayings in Matt 18.8–9, the occurrence of two of these *logia* in a different passage (Matt 5.29–30) suggests their presence in another source available to Matthew.² In view of these considerations, one can assume the authenticity of Jesus' sayings in Mark 9.43–7: this fact justifies our search for understanding them in a Jewish background.

If, therefore, Mark borrowed these sayings from the previous tradition, it is necessary to ask why he included them in Mark 9.33–50. The answer could be sought in the simple presence of the catchwords, which link these *logia* to the previous saying (Mark 9.42). A solely lexical link could also be suggested by the discrepancy that can be detected between the first *logion* about the scandal (Mark 9.42) and the subsequent series (Mark 9.43–7) on a twofold level. As regards the form, the saying in v. 42 is formulated in the third person and opens with a relative proposition (ὅς ἄν), while the following *logia* (vv. 43–7) are in the second person and are introduced by conditional clauses (ἐάν). In terms of content, Jesus speaks of scandal both in the first saying and in the following ones. However, while in v. 42 he warns against the scandal caused to the little ones, in the following words he alludes to the scandal caused to oneself by a member of one's own body. Moreover, while in the first *logion* the scandal is compared to drowning at sea, in vv. 43–7 it is considered in relation to eternal condemnation (γέεννα). Certainly, catchwords are a relevant factor for understanding the composition of these sayings;³ nevertheless, in the *logia* collected in Mark 9.33–50, it is possible to single out a linear development of Jesus' discourse.

This paper intends to propose a new interpretation of the sayings of Mark 9.43–7, in view of some texts of the Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which deal with how physically impaired people relate to their community. The consideration of this Jewish *context* will make it possible to clarify the metaphorical meaning of these *logia* and show its coherence with the Markan *co-text*: the teaching of Jesus in Mark 9.33–50.⁴

² So also F. W. Horn, 'Die synoptische Einlaßsprüche', ZNW 87 (1996) 193; W. Zager, *Gottesherrschaft und Endgericht in der Verkündigung Jesu: Eine Untersuchung zur markinischen Jesusüberlieferung einschließlich der Q-Parallelen* (BZNW 82; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996) 222; H. Giesen, 'Jüngerschaft und Nachfolge angesichts der zweiten Leidens- und Auferstehungsankündigung Jesu (Mk 9,33–50)', *SNTUA* 32 (2007) 106. The only redactional changes in Mark 9.43–7 are the phrase εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον (v. 43), with the function of explaining Semitism γέεννα to Mark's Gentile audience, and the expression βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (v. 47), used as *variatio* for ζωή; cf. Fleddermann, 'Discourse', 69–70; Horn, 'Einlaßsprüche', 193; J. Lambrecht, 'Scandal and Salt (Mark 9.42–50 and Q)', *Understanding what one reads: New Testament Essays* (ed. V. Koperski; ANL 46; Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 73.

³ Catchwords are considered the main reason for the juxtaposition of v. 42 and vv. 43–7, originally independent of one another, by Ambrozic, *Kingdom*, 174; Fleddermann, 'Discourse', 71; W. Deming, 'Mark 9.42–10.12, Matthew 5.27–32, and B. Nid. 13b: A First-Century Discussion of Male Sexuality', *NTS* 36 (1990) 131; G. Bonneau, *Stratégies rédactionnelles et fonctions communautaires de l'évangile de Marc* (EtB.NS 44; Paris: Gabalda, 2001) 253; Lambrecht, 'Scandal', 76.

⁴ In textual linguistics, by *context* one means the set of extra-textual elements that affect the interpretation of a text, such as, for example, a conceptual system within a community or an environment (the Jewish one, in our case). By *co-text*, instead, one means the set of intra-textual elements (sentences, sections, etc.) that surround a text. Recently, this distinction has been taken up by S. R. Llewelyn and W. Robinson, "If Your Hand Causes You to

2. A plurality of hypotheses

Before illustrating our interpretation, we offer a brief evaluation of the main proposals made so far for Mark 9.43–7.

2.1 A simple hyperbole?

Most scholars interpret Jesus' order to amputate one's hand or foot or gouge out one's eye, if these limbs are a cause for scandal, as an example of hyperbolic language: although self-maiming is an extreme act, it is considered by Jesus better than eternal condemnation. The function of this hyperbole is variously interpreted. A first group of scholars thinks that it intends to emphasise the inestimable value of the kingdom of God; writes F. J. Moloney: 'It is better [...] to be without a hand, a foot or an eye, than to miss the opportunity to enter the life of God's kingdom. This point can only be appreciated when one takes into account that women and men usually have two hands, two feet, two eyes. It can therefore be done without a hand, a foot or an eye; but it cannot be done without the gift of life in the Kingdom'.⁵ A similar content is consistent with other teachings of Jesus in Mark and in the Synoptic tradition. To inherit eternal life (Mark 10.17), identified with the kingdom of God (Mark 10.23, 25), a man is exhorted by Jesus to sell all of his possessions (Mark 10.21). In the parables of the treasure in a field and of the precious pearl, belonging to the *Sondergut* of Matthew, the kingdom of God is compared to priceless goods, for which it is worth renouncing anything (Matt 13.44–6). A second group of authors intends the hyperbolic language in Mark 9.43–7 as an expression of demanding discipleship. Often, these interpreters read these *logia* against the background of the requirements for discipleship established by Jesus earlier (Mark 8.34–9.1): denying oneself, carrying one's cross and losing one's life because of him and the Gospel. The willingness to sacrifice a part of one's own body is likened to these precepts: Jesus would demand from each one of his followers to remove any obstacle that prevents discipleship, even at the cost of their bodily integrity.⁶

In support of this interpretation is the consistency of these sayings with some relevant contents of Mark's Gospel, such as the kingdom of God and the discipleship, which is the main theme of the 'way section' (Mark 8.27–10.52), where our *logia* are found. But, in our opinion, these interpretations leave two questions unanswered. First, how to reconcile them with the remaining teachings of Jesus in Mark 9.33–50, which do not concern the kingdom or the conditions for discipleship, but rather the welcome of the little ones? Secondly, why does Jesus choose as hyperbole the amputation of a limb or giving up of an eye to emphasise the immeasurable value of the kingdom or the cost of discipleship? Appealing to some Old Testament passages, which forbid making cuttings on one's own body (Lev 19.28; 21.5; Deut 14.1; 1 Kings 18.28; Zech 13.6), some authors justify this choice with the horrifying reaction that images such as those used by Jesus would have aroused in a Jewish audience: better to access life in the terrible condition of being impaired than

Stumble, Cut It Off': Questions over the Figurative Nature of Mark 9.43–47 and Its Synoptic Parallels', *NovT* 63 (2021) 428–9, who highlight its relevance to establish the meaning of Mark 9.43–7.

⁵ F. J. Moloney, 'Teaching the Most Difficult Text in the Gospel of Mark: Mark 9:42–50', *Communication, Pedagogy and the Gospel of Mark* (ed. E. E. Shively and G. Van Oyen; SBLRBS 83; Atlanta: SBL, 2016) 136. Of the same opinion are J. Dechow, *Gottessohn und Herrschaft Gottes: Der Theozentrismus des Markusevangeliums* (WMANT 86; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000) 137–8; J. R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (PiNTC; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002) 294; Focant, *Évangile*, 365.

⁶ Thus Ambrozic, *Kingdom*, 175; E. Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTS 4; Sheffield: JSOT, 1981) 86; Bonneau, *Stratégies*, 292–3; Llewelyn – Robinson, "'Hand'", 446, 450.

to end up physically intact in Gehenna!⁷ But these texts do not mention maimed people. Rather, they forbid the Israelites to make cuttings on their body, a practice widespread in the cults (especially funerary) of the nations close to Israel. Therefore, it is not here that the background of the *logia* in Mark 9.43–7 must be sought.

2.2 A moral interpretation?

Several authors read the sayings in Mark 9.43–7 as an invitation to break with sin. In relation to some Old Testament passages (Job 31.5–7; Prov 6.17–18), these scholars refer to the Jewish belief that sinful instincts lie in the body organs, thus interpreted as a cause of evil deeds. In this perspective, Jesus would remind his interlocutors of the need to break with their sins, which prevent access to the kingdom of God.⁸ This proposal too is not without problems. Its major difficulty is the inconsistency with the remaining teachings of Jesus in Mark 9.33–50: it is not clear why Jesus goes from warning against a specific case (the scandal caused to the little ones: Mark 9.42) to a generic warning against sin. Furthermore, without questioning the metaphorical meaning of the *logia* in Mark 9.43–7, it is to be noted that amputating a single hand or a single foot and gouging out a single eye would not exclude the possibility of sin definitively, since the other limb or the second eye could as well cause scandal.

There is another similar interpretation, put forward by some authors, who identify the scandals caused by the hand, foot or eye with some sexual sins. Based on some rabbinic texts (*m. Nid.* 2.1; *b. Nid.* 13b), according to which those who commit such sins are doomed to destruction after their death, these scholars think that the *logia* of Jesus are inspired by an ancient tradition, later merged with the rabbinic literature. In the above passages of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, man is forbidden to touch his genitals, a clear reference to masturbation. The scandal of the hand should be associated (Mark 9.43) with this sin: in support of this, some other Jewish texts can be quoted, where the hand is linked with sexual sins (cf. Cant. 5.4; Isa 57.8; 1QS 7.15). The scandal of the foot should instead be identified with adultery, since in some Old Testament passages the feet are a euphemism for male genitalia (Exod 4.25; Judg 3.24; Ruth 3.7; 2 Sam 11.8; Isa 6.2). Finally, although the above-mentioned rabbinic texts do not speak of it, the scandal of the eye would correspond to the sensual gaze. In this perspective, the previous saying about the scandal caused to children should be read as a harsh warning against pederasty.⁹ Several remarks allow for excluding this interpretation. First, on the methodological level, the use of rabbinic literature as a key for the Gospels requires great caution, because the latter predate the former. Second, the lack of an explicit reference to the scandal of the eye in *m. Nid.* 2.1; *b. Nid.* 13b makes this intertextual connection imperfect. Third, the sexual theme has nothing to do with the co-text of Mark 9.33–50, including the saying about the scandal caused to the little ones. In fact, even if in Mark 9.42 Jesus

⁷ Cf. R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 514; Edwards, *Gospel*, 293; M. L. Strauss, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 414; D. Bock, *Mark* (NCBC; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 264.

⁸ Thus A. Descamps, 'Du discours de Marc., ix,33-50 aux paroles de Jésus', *La formation des évangiles: Problème synoptique et Formgeschichte* (ed. J. Cambier; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957) 174; J. Gnilka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (2Vols.; EKK 2; Zürich: Benziger, 1978–1979) II.65; Pesch, *Markusevangelium* II.115; Zager, *Gottesherrschaft*, 216–21; S. Légasse, *L'Évangile de Marc* (LD Commentaires 5; Paris: Cerf, 1997) 582–3; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002) 381; Stein, *Mark*, 449; B. Bosenius, *Der literarische Raum des Markusevangeliums* (WMANT 140; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014) 92.

⁹ This sexual interpretation is supported by Deming, 'Mark 9.42', 132–5; R. F. Collins, *Sexual Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Crossroad, 2000) 65–70; A. Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 450–4.

intends to refer to children (which is far from certain), A. Descamps is right when he notes: 'Il ne semble pas que, parmi les Juifs du temps de Jésus, les désordres sexuels aient été particulièrement fréquents dans le domaine des rapports avec les enfants; on ne voit là rien de comparable avec les vices du monde gréco-romain (pédérastie)'.¹⁰

2.3 A community interpretation?

Given that some texts in Graeco-Roman and New Testament literature use the human body as a metaphor to refer to a political, social or religious group,¹¹ some authors put forward a community interpretation of the sayings of Mark 9.43–7. Most of them read these *logia* as an exhortation, addressed to the disciples, to remove the harmful members from their community, just as a doctor amputates the limbs damaging to the body.¹² Assuming this perspective, I. H. Henderson interprets Mark 9.42–50 as a teaching addressed to the community leaders, while other authors think that its members are the recipients of Jesus' words: they have to separate themselves from those leaders who prove unfit for their role.¹³

Certainly, this reading has the advantage of suggesting an interpretation consistent with the *logion* on the scandal caused to the little ones (Mark 9.42): the community would be urged to excise all those who cause its weakest members to stumble. However, the community interpretation of Mark 9.43–7 also shows significant difficulties. First, the text does not contain clues that make it possible to indicate the community as being referred to in the second person singular which is used in these sayings. Secondly, can a community purged of its members who bring it scandal be considered one-eyed, one-handed, or lame? Moreover, would not it be contradictory that, shortly before, Jesus invited the disciples to an inclusive attitude towards those outside their group (Mark 9.38–40) and now exhorts them to exclude someone from the community? Finally, it is unlikely that Jesus drew on a mostly Graeco-Roman background (where the metaphor of the body occurs frequently); rather, it is more likely that he used Jewish imagery.¹⁴

¹⁰ Descamps, 'Discours', 172. Focant, *Évangile*, 366; J. Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27/A; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009) 696–7 dissociate themselves from the sexual interpretation, which is more promising for the sayings in the parallel text of Matt 5.29–30, in view of its co-text provided by the antithesis on adultery (Matt 5.28).

¹¹ Plato, *Res publica* 5.462c–e; Aristotle, *Politics* 5.2.7; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates romanae* 6.86.1–2; Titus Livy, *Ab Urbe condita* 2.32.8–12; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.75; Rom 12.4–5; 1 Cor 12.14–26; Eph 4.25, 30.

¹² Thus H. Koester, 'Mark 9:43–48 and Quintilian 8.3.75', *HTR* 71 (1978) 151–3; T. B. Cargal, 'If your Salt Should Become Non-Salt (Mark 9:33–50): Exclusion in an Inclusive Community', *Reading Communities Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte* (ed. G. A. Phillips and N. Wilkinson Duran; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002) 139–40; J. R. Donahue and D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SaPaSe 2; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002) 287; Giesen, 'Jüngerschaft', 107–9. That Jesus draws the metaphor from the medical sphere is proposed by C. R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2019) 49–53.

¹³ I. H. Henderson, 'Salted with Fire (Mark 9.42–50): Style, Oracles and (Socio-)Rhetorical Gospel Criticism', *JSNT* 80 (2000) 44–65. For the second interpretation cf. M. Hauser, *Die Herrschaft Gottes im Markusevangelium* (EHS.T 647; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998) 64–5; É. Trocmé, *L'évangile selon saint Marc* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2000) 252.

¹⁴ Contrary to the community interpretation are J. I. H. McDonald, 'Mark 9:33–50. Catechetics in Mark's Gospel', *Studia Biblica* 1978. II. *Papers on The Gospels: Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies* (ed. E. A. Livingstone; JSNTS 2; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 174; B. M. F. van Iersel, 'Mark 9.43–48 in a Martyrological Perspective', *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J. M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire* (ed. A. A. R. Bastiaensen; Steenbrvgis 1989) 335; Focant, *Évangile*, 366.

2.4 A martyrological interpretation?

This last interpretation has been proposed by B. van Iersel, who suggests an Old Testament background for the *logia* of Mark 9.43–7: the story of a Jewish woman who, together with her seven children, suffered torture and death from King Antiochius IV Epiphanes during the Maccabean revolt. They are willing to be maimed in their limbs in order not to deny the faith and customs of their fathers and announce to the king the eternal punishment which will be inflicted on him (2 Macc 7.1–42). In this perspective, Jesus would be urging his disciples not to apostatise from the faith, at the cost of being deprived even of their physical integrity.¹⁵

Some objections can be raised against this reading too. First, van Iersel interprets the self-maiming literally, while here a metaphorical meaning is more likely. Indeed, as already noted, if Jesus meant a real amputation of one's own limbs that cause scandal, it would not make sense to cut off only one hand or one foot or to gouge out just one eye.¹⁶ Secondly, unlike the text of 2 Maccabees, where the bodily injuries are a punishment inflicted by the tyrant, Jesus refers to self-maiming. Third, the texts of 2 Maccabees and of Mark envisage a different fate for the bodies in the future: while the Jewish martyrs hoped that, in the resurrection of the dead, God would have restored their maimed limbs (2 Macc 7.11; 14.46), Jesus promises one-handed, one-eyed, or crippled people the entry into life, without implying the restoration of physical integrity. Finally, although it corresponds to other instructions from Jesus on discipleship (Mark 8.34–9.1), this interpretation is not consistent with the co-text of Mark 9.33–50.¹⁷

3. A new interpretation

After this brief review and discussion of the interpretations put forward so far on the sayings of Mark 9.43–7, a new hypothesis is now proposed, which will attempt to highlight the consistency of these sayings with their co-text of Mark 9.33–50. It starts from a basic remark: in the *logia* in question, Jesus stresses the condition resulting from the possible maiming of a limb that causes scandal. Therefore, this is the message that he intends to convey, contained in the apodosis of the conditional sentences which the sayings consist of: it is preferable to enter life with one hand, one foot or one eye rather than ending up in Gehenna with all one's own limbs. Additionally, it is relevant to consider that, in these sayings, future life does not imply a restoration of physical integrity. In the Maccabean outlook of resurrection, taken up in other Jewish texts too, the dead would rise again with the same form and defects that had distinguished their physical appearance when they were still alive; however, immediately after the resurrection, the righteous would be restored to a glorious appearance, free of defects.¹⁸ Omitting any reference to the restoration of the maimed limbs, Jesus wants to emphasise the condition of impairment, preferable to physical integrity insofar as it grants access to life. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how these categories mentioned by Jesus (one-handed, lame, blind) and, more generally, how physically impaired people were considered in the Jewish world. Here a key to reading and interpreting the *logia* in question must be looked for.

¹⁵ van Iersel, 'Mark 9,43–48', 333–41.

¹⁶ There are other Jewish texts where the maiming of limbs is intended metaphorically: cf. Philo, *Spec.* 3.179; b. BQ 83b–84a. The metaphorical meaning of the *logia* in Mark 9.43–7 is underscored by Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 697; Stein, *Mark*, 449; Strauss, *Mark*, 414.

¹⁷ For a refutation of the martyrological hypothesis cf. M. Stowasser, 'Διάκονος πάντων. Eine Untersuchung zur ekklesialen Intention von Mk 9,33–50', *BZ* 46 (2002) 62–3; Stein, *Mark*, 448.

¹⁸ Cf. 2 Macc 7.11; 14.46; 2 Bar 50–51; b. *Sanh.* 91b; *Tan. B.* 11.9; *Ber. R.* 95.1. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 690, thinks that, in these sayings, Jesus takes such a perspective for granted, but this fact is not at all evident.

3.1 Mark 9.43–7 in its Jewish context

In the Old Testament, there are several texts shedding light on the way in which maimed people were held in relation to a community or a group. The first relevant text is Lev 21.16–24. Contained in the wide section of the Holiness Code (Lev 17.1–26.46), this text is part of a passage that includes norms concerning priests (Lev 21.1–24). These verses forbid men with physical defects to perform some priestly functions. Among the twelve cases of bodily impairment listed, there are also those mentioned by Jesus in Mark 9.43–7: the list begins with the blind and the lame while, later, it also alludes to those who have a broken hand. These men are prevented from coming to offer the ‘bread of God’ (Lev 21.17), that is the burnt offerings (Lev 21.21), a prerogative of the Levite priests; *a fortiori*, they must not go as far as the veil (Lev 21.23), which could be passed through only by the high priest (Lev 4.6; 16.2, 12, 15; 24.3). The reason for this prohibition is grounded in the idea of God’s holiness, according to which only someone or something sound can stand in the presence of God. In fact, the priest’s physical integrity corresponds to the sanctity of the worship he offers.¹⁹ For the same reason, in the next chapter (Lev 22.22–4), it is explicitly forbidden to offer to the Lord animals with the same physical defects as those preventing the performance of priestly functions. Based on the same conception, similar norms about the physical integrity of the priests are also found outside Israel, such as some texts of Mesopotamian and Graeco-Roman literature show.²⁰

Nevertheless, the text of Lev 21.16–24 clarifies that Levites with physical impairments were not ruled out from the priestly tribe. In fact, they could eat the flesh of sacrifices and other foods offered to the Lord, among things considered both holy and most holy (Lev 21.22; Ezek 44.13). In the first group, there are the priestly parts of the peace offerings (Lev 7.31–4), of the firstborn of the animals (Num 18.15–19), of the first fruits of the harvest (Num 18.12–13; Ezek 44.30) and of the tithes paid by the Israelites (Num 18.25–32; Ezek 44.30). In the second one, the Law includes the priestly parts of the sacrifices for sin (Lev 6.22; Num 18.9; Ezek 42.13; 44.29) and repayment (Lev 7.1, 6; 14.13; Num 18.9; Ezek 42.13; 44.29), and those of the offerings (Lev 2.3, 10; 6.9–11; Num 18.9; Ezek 42.13; 44.29) and the loaves placed every Saturday on the golden table before the Lord (Lev 24.5–9). In this way, Levites with physical defects were also assured of the necessary sustenance, even more necessary, if an impairment made it difficult to carry out a job. Additionally, the prohibition concerned officiating in the meeting tent and at the altar of sacrifices, but it did not prevent access to the sanctuary, where they could perform secondary services, such as room cleaning and maintenance or helping other priests.²¹ In reference to the Second Temple, some rabbinic texts mention priests with physical defects who perform some ancillary tasks related to worship, such as the sound of the trumpet in the sanctuary (*t. Sot.* 7.16; *y. Yom.* 1.1) or the blessing in the courtyard (*t. Sot.* 7.8).

These data highlight the condition of physically impaired Levites in relation to their tribe. While remaining part of their group, having certain rights and carrying out some cult functions, they are excluded from the sacrificial offerings, which in Levitical worship is ‘a major part of a priest’s vocation’.²² Therefore, regarding these Levites, T. Hieke is right to conclude: ‘Er ist von der mit hohem Ansehen verbundenen priesterlichen Haupttätigkeit ausgeschlossen und nicht (mehr) auf der gleichen Ebene wie seine

¹⁹ Cf. J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Dallas: Word Books, 1992) 351.

²⁰ For a review of these Mesopotamian texts cf. E. S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 317–8; J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3/A; New York: Doubleday, 2007) 1842–3. For the Graeco-Roman world cf. Plato, *De legibus* 6.759c; Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 4.2. Other Jewish texts confirm the prohibition of entering the priesthood for maimed men: Flavius Josephus, *Ant.* 14.366; *m. Mid.* 5.4.

²¹ As noted by Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1830.

²² N. Kiuchi, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove: Apollos, 2007) 398.

Priesterkollegen ohne körperlichen Schaden'.²³ In this perspective, it is possible to speak of a minority state in which these priests were within their tribe.²⁴

A similar idea is found in the text of Deut 23.2, albeit with considerable differences. Unlike Lev 21.16–24, this passage does not allude to multiple conditions of impairment, but only to one of those listed in Leviticus: being a eunuch or maiming of genitals, due not to illness or accident, but to a free choice, taken for political or religious reasons.²⁵ Also in this passage, maimed people are mentioned in relation to their community: Deut 23.2–9 lists those who cannot be admitted to the congregation of the Lord. When the Old Testament refers to it or to the assembly of the Israelites (with the Hebrew noun קהל), almost always the texts denote the community gathered for a cult celebration,²⁶ or to listen to the word of the Lord²⁷ or convened to the meeting tent or the Jerusalem temple.²⁸ The same meanings can be found for the corresponding verb (קהל).²⁹ Therefore, as often noted, the congregation of the Lord which the prescriptions of Deut 23.2–9 refer to is not to be identified *tout-court* with the people of Israel, but with the community that gathers to worship.³⁰ Therefore, the prohibition to admit maimed people to this assembly finds its reason in the same background as Lev 21.16–24: what is physically impaired cannot be in contact with God's holiness.³¹ At the same time, the condition of maiming had consequences on taking part in community life: while dwelling among the other Israelites, men with physical defects could not be present at a relevant community moment such as worship. P. C. Craigie rightly concludes: 'Thus to enter the assembly of the Lord would indicate a person who became a true Israelite and who therefore shared in the worship of the Lord. The expression is somewhat narrower in its intent than *Israel*, taken as a whole, for there would be resident aliens and others who, though a part of the community, were nevertheless not full members of it'.³²

The hindrance to taking part in worship for maimed people could also be reminded in 2 Sam 5.8, where some interpreters think that, in the story of the conquest of Jerusalem, the author reports an aetiology about the prohibition to enter the temple for the blind and lame people.³³ However, this interpretation is not shared unanimously.³⁴ In any

²³ T. Hieke, *Leviticus*. Zweiter Teilband: 16–27 (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2014) 837.

²⁴ So too S. J. Melcher, 'Visualizing the Perfect Cult: The Priestly Rationale for Exclusion', *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 59; S. M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 31–2.

²⁵ For a brief review on the important role played by eunuchs at the ancient courts and on the pagan cults that implied castration cf. J. R. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 644–5

²⁶ Cf. Exod 12.6; Lev 4.13–14, 21; 16.17, 33; Num 10.7; 15.15; 19.20; Judg 21.5; 1 Kings 8.14, 22, 55, 65; 1 Chron 13.2, 4; 2 Chron 6.3, 12–13; 7.8; 20.5, 14; 29.23, 28–32; 30.2, 4, 13, 17, 23–5; Neh 8.17; Pss 22.23, 26; 35.18; 107.32; 149.1; Joel 2.16.

²⁷ Cf. Deut 5.22; 9.10; 10.4; 18.16; Neh 8.2; 13.1.

²⁸ Cf. Num 16.33; 17.12; 2 Chron 1.3, 5; 23.3; Ezra 10.1, 8, 12, 14; Jer 26.17.

²⁹ Cf. Exod 32.1; Lev 8.3–4; Num 8.9; 10.17; 16.19; 17.7; Deut 4.10; 31.12, 28; Josh 18.1; 1 Kings 8.1–2; 1 Chron 13.5; 15.3; 2 Chron 5.2–3; 20.26; Esther 9.15–18; Jer 26.9

³⁰ Cf. P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 296; E. H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (NAC 4; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 307; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002) 348.

³¹ Cf. R. D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 179; Lundbom, *Deuteronomy*, 644.

³² Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, 296.

³³ Cf. P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984) 140; W. Dietrich, *Samuel*. Teilband 3. 1Sam 27 – 2Sam 8 (BKAT 8/3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019) 459. On the same line, S. M. Olyan, "'Anyone Blind or Lame Shall Not Enter in the House': On the Interpretation of Second Samuel 5:8b", *CBQ* 60 (1998) 218–27, thinks that the reference to the blind and lame people involves subjects with any impairment.

³⁴ For example, A. R. Ceresko, 'The Identity of "the Blind and the Lame" ('iwwer ûpissēah) in 2 Samuel 5:8b', *CBQ* 63 (2001) 23–30; J. Skipper, 'Reconsidering the Imagery of Disability in 2 Samuel 5:8b', *CBQ* 67 (2005) 422–34,

case, these words echo the mockery placed on the lips of the Jebusites (2 Sam 5.6), who thought Jerusalem so strong that the blind and lame (weak people) would have been enough to ward off David's attack on their city.³⁵ Therefore, this passage confirms the marginal condition which people with physical defects experience in their communities, whether they are religious or social ones.³⁶

Our appealing to these texts, concerning marginalised people because of their physical impairments, does not intend to suggest that Jesus' sayings in Mark 9.43–7 are directly inspired by them: the lack of lexical contacts between these passages and our *logia* makes this unlikely. On the other hand, in light of these passages, one cannot exclude the possibility that Jesus keeps in his mind that maimed people were considered marginal. This perspective was known in the Judaism of the New Testament era, as confirmed by several passages of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where physical impairment involves the exclusion from the community. Outlining the eschatological Israel which, unlike the remaining people, will be led by Zadokite priests and will keep the covenant with God, the *Rule of the Congregation* rules out maimed people from the community of the final era. The reason is like that one reported in the texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy: God's holiness, represented by his angels, dwells in the assembly.

No man, defiled by any of the impurities of a man, shall enter the assembly of these; and everyone who is defiled by them should be not established in his office amongst the congregation. And everyone who is defiled in his flesh, paralysed in his feet or in his hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb or defiled in his flesh with a blemish visible to the eyes, or the tottering old man who cannot keep upright in the midst of the assembly, these shall not enter to take their place among the congregation of famous men, for the angels of holiness are among their congregation (1QS_a 2.3–9).³⁷

The same perspective can be found in the *Damascus Document*, where the list of people to be kept out of the community includes fewer categories of maimed people, some of which are not mentioned in Leviticus, like insane minds and children: 'And no one stupid or deranged, [should enter]; and anyone feeble-[minded and insane], those with sightless [eyes, the lame or one who stumbles, or a deaf person, or an under-age boy, none of these], should enter [the congregation, since the holy angels are in its midst]' (CD 15.15–17). In the backdrop of the eschatological war that, at the end of time, will see the sons of light, who will fight on the side of God, against the sons of darkness, deployed alongside Belial, the *War Scroll* rules out some categories from the first group, for the same reasons: 'And no lame, blind, paralysed person nor any man who has an indelible blemish on his flesh, nor any man suffering from uncleanness in his flesh, none of these will go out to war with them. All these shall be volunteers for war, perfect in spirit and body, and ready for the day of vengeance. And every man who has not cleansed himself of his "spring" on the day of battle will not go down with them, for the holy angels are together

think that the prohibition concerns the house of David and not the temple. According to them, here David would refer to the history of the monarchy, between a lame (Mephibosheth, son of Saul) and a blind man (Zedekiah, the last king of Judah).

³⁵ Despite the difficulties of the Hebrew text, this is the most obvious interpretation for the Jebusites' words, as suggested by Flavius Josephus, *Ant.* 7.61. Cf. A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Dallas: Word Books, 1989) 82–3; D. T. Tsumura, *The Second Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019) 96.

³⁶ We cannot offer an exhaustive discussion of the several readings proposed for 2 Sam 5.6–8. We have given little space to this text in order to not risk basing our proposal on interpretations that are hypothetical.

³⁷ For a more complete comment on this text cf. L. H. Schiffman, *The Eschatological Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Study of the Rule of the Congregation* (SBLMS 38; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 43–9.

with their armies' (1QM 7.4–6).³⁸ Finally, the *Temple Scroll* prevents the blind men from entering the holy city, where the temple of God is (11QTemple 45.12–14). These texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls agree that people with bodily impairments were marginalised, if not ruled out, by the community.

A condition of social marginalisation for maimed people is attested in several New Testament passages. The blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10.46) or some anonymous blind men (Matt 20.30; Luke 18.35) lie like beggars along the road out of Jericho; even the man blind from birth, in the Fourth Gospel, shares the same fate (John 9.8). In addition to the blind, crippled and other sick people lie as beggars at the gates or under the galleries of the Temple (Matt 21.14; John 5.3; Acts 3.1–2). The blind, crippled and lame, together with the poor, are contrasted by Jesus with rich people, relatives, or friends (Luke 14.12–13). These sayings of Jesus are taken up in the subsequent parable of the great feast (Luke 14.16–24) where, instead of those who declined the invitation to the banquet, marginal people are gathered, including the blind and the crippled, whom the master's servants find on the streets and alleys of their town (Luke 14.21).

In view of this brief survey about the condition of physically impaired people in the Jewish imagery, one can agree with the conclusions of S. M. Olyan: “‘Defects’ are typically devalued in biblical discourse. Their negative construction is made manifest through the text’s efforts to stigmatise and marginalise those who possess them. Persons with ‘defects’ are stigmatised and assigned marginal social positions.”³⁹

3.2 Mark 9.43–7 in its co-text

Several authors have attempted to interpret the *logia* of Mark 9.43–7 in view of the section of Mark 9.33–50, which focuses on the question of greatness within the community of Jesus’ disciples. Usually, reading these sayings in connection with the previous *logion* (Mark 9.42), they interpret the scandal caused by one’s own limbs as the stumbling block to the faith of the least in the community.⁴⁰ But, while grasping this connection, none of these scholars explains why Jesus resorts to the images of the amputation of a limb and giving up of an eye. In view of the consideration of physically impaired people in the Jewish environment, one can now focus on the co-text where Mark places our sayings and show its coherence of meaning.

This section is opened by Jesus’ question to the disciples on the theme of their discussion on the way to Capernaum (Mark 9.33). After clarifying, as an omniscient narrator, that the disciples had discussed who was the greatest among them (Mark 9.34), highlighting their misunderstanding of the announcement of Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection (Mark 9.30–2), Mark reports the teaching to the Twelve. Here one can observe a pattern recurring three times in the section of Mark 8.27–10.52: 1) Jesus’ announcement of the passion (Mark 8.31; 9.31; 10.33–4); 2) disciples’ misunderstanding (Peter in Mark 8.32–3; the Twelve in Mark 9.32–4; James and John in Mark 10.35–40); 3) Jesus’ instruction (Mark 8.34–9.1; 9.35–50; 10.41–5). In this case, Jesus’ teaching opens with a fundamental statement: whoever wants to be first must be the last and the servant of all (Mark 9.35). This general principle is the key to understanding the brief episodes and Jesus’ *logia*, narrated in the subsequent section. Jesus immediately concretises the principle

³⁸ That the interest of the *War Scroll* is the purity of the camp is noted by B. Schultz, *Conquering the World: The War Scroll (1QM) Reconsidered* (STDJ 76; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 249.

³⁹ Olyan, *Disability*, 46.

⁴⁰ Cf., for example, U.C. von Wahlde, ‘Mark 9:33–50: Discipleship: The Authority That Serves’, *BZ* 29 (1985) 59; Stowasser, ‘Διάρκοτος’, 64; N. F. Santos, *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark* (JSNTS 237; London – New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 187; J.-P. Fabre, *Le disciple selon Jésus: Le chemin vers Jérusalem dans l’évangile de Marc* (Bruxelles: Lessius, 2014) 165.

just enunciated with an action expressing its meaning: he places a child amid the Twelve, embraces him and indicates in the reception of children the criterion for the welcome to be reserved for him (Mark 9.36–7). Now, since in the ancient cultural imagery, both in the Jewish and in the Graeco-Roman environment, childhood was considered a minority state from which one passes through education, and since children were subjects without rights and dependent in everything on the *paterfamilias* (in the Jewish context they were not responsible for the observance of the Law), it is clear that here Jesus assimilates the welcome towards him to that reserved to marginal people.⁴¹

In continuity with these words is the episode of the exorcist outside the circle of disciples (Mark 9.38–40). Jesus corrects the exclusivist position of the Twelve, who had tried to prevent a man not belonging to their group from casting out demons in the name of Jesus, with an inclusive perspective, which considers on its side those who, although not part of their circle, do not oppose it. Following Jesus must not arouse presumptions of superiority and exclusivity; rather, the disciples are exhorted to foster the inclusion of those who are on the fringe of, if not outside, their group.⁴²

The next saying (Mark 9.41) functions as a transition. On the one hand, it is linked to the previous verses by the conjunction γάρ and the catchword ὄνομα and continues to focus on the relationship between the disciples (Χριστοῦ ἐστε) and those who, although not part of their group, work in their favour, even if only with the offer of a glass of water. On the other hand, this *logion* introduces the following ones. On the formal side, the formulation ὃς ἄν is taken up in the following saying (Mark 9.42). In terms of content, the scandal towards the little ones is antithetical to the benevolent gesture of offering the glass of water (likely, by those who are not disciples), while the idea of reward (μισθός) forestalls that of eschatological remuneration, which will be found in the *logia* about the scandal.

At this point, Mark inserts the saying that urges the disciples to beware of scandalising the little ones who believe (Mark 9.42). Decisive for the interpretation of this *logion* are the notions of scandal and littleness. In their broadest meaning, the noun σκάνδαλον and the verb σκανδαλίζω denote an obstacle, a stumble, or a trap. In the Old Testament, in addition to this more generic meaning, these words sometimes refer to the peoples close to Israel who, with their idols, risk diverting the people from faith in their God (cf. Josh 23.13; Judg 2.3; Ps 105.36 LXX; Wis 14.11; Hos 4.17). In the wake of this meaning, the New Testament vocabulary of scandal often denotes the lack of faithfulness to the word of Jesus and the turning away from faith in him and in the Gospel;⁴³ the other Markan occurrences of σκανδαλίζω go in the same direction (Mark 4.17; 6.3; 14.27, 29). Therefore, warning not to scandalise the little ones who believe, Jesus is cautioning each of his disciples against putting a stumbling block or obstacle to their faith.⁴⁴

⁴¹ For the childhood condition in antiquity cf. T. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989); O. L. Yarbrough, 'Parents and Children in the Jewish Family of Antiquity', *The Jewish Family in Antiquity* (ed. S. J. Cohen; BJS 89; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993) 39–59; B. Rawson, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); S. Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (LNTS 521; London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2015) 5–37; S. W. Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel: The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); K. Garroway, *Growing up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts* (SBLABS 23; Atlanta: SBL, 2018).

⁴² For a complete exegesis of Mark 9.38–40 cf. F. Filannino, *La fine di Satana: Gli esorcismi nel vangelo di Marco* (SRivBib 67; Bologna: EDB, 2020) 209–22.

⁴³ Cf. Matt 11.6; 13.21, 57; 16.23; 24.10; 26.31, 33; Luke 7.23; John 16.1; Rom 14.13; 16.17; 1 Cor 8.13; 2 Cor 11.29; Rev 2.14.

⁴⁴ For the meaning of σκανδαλίζω/σκάνδαλον cf. G. Stählin, 'σκάνδαλον, σκανδαλίζω', *TWNT* VII.339–58; A. Humbert, 'Essai d'une théologie du scandale dans les Synoptiques', *Bib.* 35 (1954) 1–28.

Who are the little ones (μικροί) who must not be scandalised? They cannot be the children (παιδιά) mentioned above (Mark 9.36–7): the believers in Jesus cannot be limited to children.⁴⁵ Also problematic is the identification of the group of the little ones with all the disciples, as if μικροί was their alternative name.⁴⁶ The demonstrative adjective τούτων, with its anaphoric meaning, is a clue that suggests searching for the referent of the term μικρῶν in the previous verses. If so, the most likely solution is that τούτων refers to the characters mentioned earlier, such as the exorcist outside the disciples' group and the one who gives them even a glass of water. In that case, it might come as a surprise that Jesus speaks of them as believers (τῶν πιστευόντων). However, if shortly before he had pointed out the prayer, that is an expression of faith (cf. Mark 11.22–4), as a condition for casting out demons (Mark 9.29), then the unknown exorcist met by the Twelve can be considered a believer. Similarly, since it is made in virtue of his belonging to Christ, the offer of a glass of water to a disciple expresses not only a vague kindness, but a good bent for Jesus.⁴⁷ In this sense, the little ones not to be scandalised are believers who have not yet expressed their faith explicitly following Jesus and, therefore, remain on the fringe of the disciples' group.⁴⁸ The choice to refer to them with the term μικροί emphasises the opposition with the disciples' desire to be great, which had made Jesus' teaching necessary (Mark 9.34). Ultimately, Jesus urges the Twelve and, together with them, whoever sets out to follow him (ὁς ὄν) not to claim a superiority that rules out those who do not belong to their circle, but rather to show their greatness in welcoming them.

It is now possible to note a full consistency of the imagery in Mark 9.43–7 with its co-text. Jesus says that the entry into eternal life without a hand, a foot or an eye is preferable to the preservation of physical integrity if the latter has Gehenna as its fate. If, as it has been pointed out, the bodily impairment implied a marginal position within a community or a group, one can suggest that in Mark 9.43–7 Jesus is urging the disciples to make themselves last, thus avoiding stumbling in their own following, in order to enter the kingdom of God. H. Fleddermann is right, when he concludes: 'Ultimately, the disciples are not scandalised by their hands or feet or eyes, but by their striving for honor, their lack of understanding, their unbelief, their steadfast refusal to accept the cross'.⁴⁹ Therefore, Jesus tells his disciples not only to beware of causing scandal to the little ones but also to share their minority state. A similar interpretation is consistent with the initial content in Mark 9.35: whoever wants to be first must become last and servant of all. Therefore, in Jesus' metaphorical language, inspired by the Jewish context outlined above, physical integrity expresses full belonging to the community. However, if this belonging makes one presume one's own superiority over other members of the community, and thus it becomes a stumbling block, not only for the little ones (Mark 9.42) but also for one's own discipleship, Jesus suggests taking up a marginal condition like that of maimed people, exemplified by the one-handed (v. 43), the lame (v. 45) and the one-eyed (v. 47). It is better to be last and enter the kingdom of God than to be first and suffer eternal condemnation!

The final verses (Mark 9.49–50) complete this teaching. Here Jesus uses the metaphor of salt, for whose interpretation it is necessary to start from the two final imperatives (v. 50b), arranged in a synonymic parallelism (ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἄλα/εἰρηνεύετε ἐν

⁴⁵ As noted by Légasse, *Évangile* 580; Lambrecht, 'Scandal', 71.

⁴⁶ Thus France, *Gospel*, 381; Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 689.

⁴⁷ For this identification of the little ones cf. also Llewelyn and Robinson, "'Hand'", 443.

⁴⁸ So Lambrecht, 'Scandal', 71; Giesen, 'Jüngerschaft', 105; P. Spitaler, 'Biblical Concern for the Marginalized. Mark's Stories about Welcoming the Little Ones (Mc 9,33-11,11)', *ETL* 87 (2011) 104; Fabre, *Disciple*, 165.

⁴⁹ Fleddermann, 'Discourse', 74–5.

ἀλλήλοις).⁵⁰ The order to have salt in oneself is to be understood as an urging to a peaceful coexistence with the other members of the community. This meaning is confirmed by several passages in ancient, Jewish and Graeco-Roman literary texts, where salt is the symbol of an inviolable covenant or communion, with God and among human beings.⁵¹ Therefore, the *logia* on salt exhort the disciples to live peacefully with each other (Mark 9.50: ἐν ἀλλήλοις), in opposition to the discussion on the greatness that had triggered Jesus' teaching (Mark 9.34: πρὸς ἀλλήλους).⁵² This harmony among believers can be achieved only at the cost of trials and renunciations (symbolised by the salting fire in Mark 9.49), like that one of any claim to greatness, which risks hindering oneself (Mark 9.43–7) and the little ones of the community (Mark 9.42) from following Jesus.⁵³

Therefore, although it does not agree with the interpretation provided by them, this paper shares the hermeneutic perspective of Llewelyn and Robinson to clarify the meaning of the sayings in Mark 9.43–7: it 'is dependent on where an expression is situated in terms of its co-text and context'.⁵⁴

Competing interest. The author declares none.

⁵⁰ A synonymic parallelism is also pointed out by Fleddermann, 'Discourse', 73; von Wahlde, 'Mark 9:33–50', 64; Strauss, *Mark*, 415. J. E. Latham, *The Religious Symbolism of Salt* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1982) 227, sees a Semitic form here: when two imperatives are linked by copula, the second one expresses the result or purpose of the first one.

⁵¹ For the Jewish imagery cf. Lev 2.13; Num 18.19; 2 Chron 13.5; Ezra 4.14; Jub 21.11; Philo, *Ios.* 210. For the Graeco-Roman world cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.4.1156b; Cicero, *Laelius de amicitia* 19.67. In the New Testament, the verb συναλιζομαι expresses table communion (Acts 1.4). For this meaning of the salt in Mark 9.50 cf. Fleddermann, 'Discourse', 73; Latham, *Symbolism*, 227; M. Lattke, 'Salz der Freundschaft in Mc 9 50c', *ZNW* 75 (1984) 54–9; Strauss, *Mark*, 415; R. Doran, "'Salting with Fire" (Mark 9:49)', *NovT* 62 (2020) 372.

⁵² So Gundry, *Mark*, 515–6; Légasse, *Évangile*, 586; Focant, *Évangile*, 368; Fabre, *Disciple*, 166.

⁵³ This interpretation of Mark 9.49 is shared by Focant, *Évangile*, 367; Fabre, *Disciple*, 166–7; S. Adamiak, 'Who and why will be "salted with fire" (Mk 9:49)?', *Biblica et Patristica Thorunensia* 7 (2014) 21.

⁵⁴ Llewelyn and Robinson, "'Hand'", 451.

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