Research Article

Pauline Soteriology in the Gospel of Mark

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This study, the third in a series, argues that canonical Mark is a deliberately reserved text: a gospel written to be heard on two levels, a public surface for every hearer and a disclosed sense delivered, in the interpretation, to those prepared to receive it. Mark announces the method himself — "nothing is hidden except in order to be disclosed" (4:22) — and the study traces its execution across a series of features that a plain reading leaves unexplained: a lamp that "comes" in a rare construction the New Testament otherwise attests only in Paul; a right-and-left architecture, drawn from the singular lampstand vision of Zechariah 4, that resolves at the cross; a salting verb (ἁλισθήσεται, 9:49) reproduced verbatim from the one verse of the Septuagint that carries it — the covenant-of-salt command of Lev 2:13 — with the fire of judgment set where the salt of the covenant stood; and an ending whose stone is named by the verb that, of a stone, the Greek scriptures use only at the betrothal-well of Genesis 29. The study's central focus is Mark's salt sayings. At the hinge of the salt sayings stands a marked form (ἅλα) — not the neuter ἅλας Mark writes twice in the same verse, but the Septuagint's accusative of ἅλς, the ἅλα of that same verse's "salt of the covenant" — anchoring the imperative "have salt in yourselves" to the covenant that made an offering acceptable and unlocking Paul's idiom "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1). Read as a reserved sequence, the salt of Mark 9:49–50 discloses a complete statement of Pauline soteriology — justification by participation in Christ, in which the universal fire of judgment becomes, for those who carry the covenant-salt, the fire of an acceptable sacrifice — and the covenant disclosed under the salt opens, in the marriage teaching that follows it and at the tomb, into a second figure of the same bond: the one-flesh union of the bridegroom and his people, the two covenant arcs closing together at the rolled-away stone. The study then argues that the gospel's first readers answered this reserved gospel as a controversy: the sayings source mocked (proto)-Mark's salt through a bilingual pun calling it foolish (μωρανθῇ); Matthew aggressively dismantled the salt, lamp, and measure across his Sermon; and (proto)-Luke dissolved the unified salt into scattered proverbs and severed the salt from the marriage teaching it had introduced. This reception refines the documentary model of the previous

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studies, casting the synoptic relationships as a sequence of answering moves over the gospel Mark reserved. The reading is offered as a hypothesis — the most economical account of features that resist a plain explanation — rather than as proof, with its load-bearing data distinguished throughout from the interpretive frame that gathers them.

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1. Introduction

This is the third of three studies, and the most venturesome of them. The first established, on statistical grounds, a documentary model of the Synoptic Gospels: Mark composed first, Matthew drawing on Mark and a sayings source, Luke drawing on all three.[1] The second argued that Mark is composite — that canonical Mark is an expansion of an earlier proto-Mark, enlarged by an author in the orbit of Paul's mission, who added to the inherited gospel a program of Gentile-facing material keyed to Isaiah.[2] Each study rests on firmer ground than the one that follows it. The first is a quantitative argument with a measurable result; the second a source-critical argument disciplined by formal criteria; the present study, which asks what canonical Mark *means* and how its first readers answered it, is the most interpretive of the three, and the reader should weigh it accordingly. What is offered here is not proof of the kind the earlier studies aimed at, but a reading — one that accounts for a striking quantity of the gospel's oddities, and that can be tested, where it can be tested at all, by asking of the features whether accident is a more economical explanation than design.

The reading is this: that canonical Mark, and the proto-Mark beneath it, contain a Pauline soteriology in a deliberately reserved form — a gospel written to be read aloud to a congregation while an instructed interpreter disclosed to the prepared what its surface withheld. That Mark's theology is Pauline in its shape is not itself a novel claim: Marcus[3] has argued at length that Mark writes as an interpreter of Paul, and the affinities of his Christology and his soteriology with the Pauline mission are widely recognized. What is argued here is not the presence of that theology but its *manner* — that Mark did not set his Pauline soteriology on the surface of his gospel, where it could be read by anyone, but reserved it: built it into the text in such a way that the surface would carry one sense to the crowd and a second, disclosed sense to those instructed to hear it. The claim is not that Mark is Pauline; it is that Mark's Paulinism is reserved.

The signs that Mark works in this way are not invented for the occasion; several have long been noticed[4][5]. The disciples are famously dull: Peter, the sons of Zebedee, the Twelve, and Jesus's own family failing again and again to understand him[6]; a lamp is said to "come" rather than to be brought (4:21)[7]; the narrator remarks that Jesus "did not speak to them except in parables" (4:34a); at the hinge of the gospel's most concentrated theological sequence a marked form of a single word appears — ἄλα — where the neighboring clauses twice write the ordinary ἅλας (9:49–50)[8], alongside the general inscrutability of Mark's salt sayings[9]; a young man flees naked at the arrest (14:51–52) and a young man sits clothed in the empty tomb (16:5)[7]; and the gospel ends not in proclamation but in silence — the women flee the tomb and say nothing to anyone (16:8)[7] — with the stone found already rolled away, named with a verb whose scriptural home is a marriage begun at a well[10]. These are not the habits of a plain text.

The study proceeds from its firmest ground. It begins with light. The lamp of Mark 4:21 does not behave as lamps do: it *comes*, an intransitive of motion that personifies it, and it comes toward a destination the surface does not name. Set beside two later scenes — the request of James and John for the places at Jesus's right and left, refused (10:35–40), and the two figures crucified at his right and his left (15:27) — it discloses an architecture drawn from Zechariah 4, the vision of a lampstand flanked by two anointed ones, one to the right and one to the left, who attend the Lord of the whole earth.

The correspondence can be pressed in the one way these readings can be pressed: by asking what the odds are that it is accidental. A lamp is personified and made to "come"; a request for the places at the right and left is set and refused, those places reserved for those "for whom they have been prepared" (10:40); the right and left are then filled at the cross; and at Bethany Jesus is anointed, an act Mark glosses as preparation for burial (14:8) — so that within Mark to be anointed is to be prepared, and the "prepared" places at the right and left become anointed ones. The whole is drawn toward the single Old Testament text that joins a lampstand to two flanking anointed attendants: Zechariah 4. For these to coincide by chance, five independent improbabilities must fall together on the one vision that unifies them.

The lamp is where the method shows itself most clearly, because the correspondences are concrete and the template is singular; what follows applies two questions to the rest of the material: "Is this accident?" and "If not, what is it saying?"

From light the study turns to the measure saying that stands beside the lamp (4:24–25), and to the secret seed parable that follows after that. The study then reviews the esoteric pairs highlighted in the previous

study, and then turns to salt, and dwells there, for the salt sayings of Mark 9:49–50 are the center of the gospel's reserved theology and the center of this study.

The argument is twofold: that beneath the surface proverb Mark has built, out of the salt of Leviticus "with all your offerings you shall offer salt" (Lev 2:13), and out of Paul's idiom "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1), a complete statement of justification — the worshiper made acceptable to God not through the cult or through moral achievement but through participation in Christ; and that the marked form ἅλα is where the two readings part company: to those outside, the word is simply salt, and the imperative a moral proverb about savor and peace; to the prepared hearer who is shown its source, it is the Septuagint's ἅλα of the covenant, and the imperative an instruction to have within oneself the covenant that makes an offering acceptable — now the covenant sealed in Christ.

It then asks how Mark's first readers answered him, and the answers are themselves evidence that there was something to answer. Matthew, in particular, answers Mark point for point, with full comprehension and hostility, dismantling the salt, the lamp, and the measure across the Sermon on the Mount and replacing their soteriology with his own. And we also argue that the sayings source answers proto-Mark with hostility, creating "moronic" salt. (Proto)-Luke, on the other hand, attempts to be a unifier and offend neither side. He retains almost all of Mark's text but drives the wedge of his travel narrative between the two halves of Mark's pericope. That these independent authors should respond so differently — and so deliberately — to the same Markan material is hard to explain unless the material was, in fact, doing what is claimed.

One of these responses opens onto a refinement of the documentary model the earlier studies built. The sayings source, on the account given here, was not a neutral early collection but the work of a bilingual author of the Jerusalem circle who, alongside the traditional sayings of Jesus, composed at least one saying to answer proto-Mark directly — the salt saying. Its weapon was a pun available only to a writer who knew both tongues: the Aramaic root *tpal*, which means at once *to lose savor* and *to be foolish*, so that the saying charges, under its breath, that Mark's salt is not the profound thing he made of it but a thing misheard — that Mark, in a word, played the fool with what Jesus said. Matthew, rendering the saying into Greek, preserved the charge in his choice of μωρανθῇ, "become foolish," where a saying about salt would have led any innocent translator to write "become tasteless." Read so, the synoptic documents fall into a sequence of answering blows: proto-Mark first; the sayings source firing back; proto-Luke attempting a synthesis; canonical Mark answering in turn, with a pro-Gentile expansion; Matthew

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answering again, with his own reworking of Mark's gospel; and canonical Luke inheriting the quarrel. It is the controversy a partisan witness like Papias, writing from within the Jewish-Christian stream, would both remember and shade.

Two further sections round out the study: the gospel's silent ending, whose rolled-away stone carries the same reserved technique into the resurrection scene, and a cumulative reckoning of the odds against so many correspondences arising by chance.

A final word on what is and is not claimed. The mystery-cult frame is a hypothesis, not a datum, and the readings that depend most heavily on it are the least secure claims in these three studies. Where a reading can be anchored — in the manuscripts that carry ἄλα, in the singular template of Zechariah 4, in Matthew's telling word ωρανθῇ — it is anchored, and the argument leans there. Where it cannot, it is offered as the most economical account of features a plain reading leaves unexplained.

1.1. The Reserved Text: Mark's Own Method

The reading offered in this study supposes that Mark wrote to be understood on two levels — a surface for every hearer, and a reserved sense for those instructed in it. This is not a frame imposed on the gospel from outside. Mark states it himself, and states it twice, in the one short passage where he pauses to say how his teaching works.

The first statement is the famous one. Jesus says: "to you has been given the mystery [τὸ μυστήριον] of the kingdom of God, but to those outside everything comes in parables" (4:11). The teaching is deliberately divided — a sense given to insiders, withheld from those without — and the citation of Isaiah that follows, that they may look and not perceive and hear and not understand (4:12), makes the division purposeful: the outsiders are *meant* to receive only the surface.

The second statement is the more remarkable, and it is less often read as what it is. A few lines later, after the saying of the lamp, Mark has Jesus say: "For nothing is hidden except in order to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except in order to come to light" (4:22). The grammar is exact and it is doing real work. Mark does not say that hidden things happen to come out in the end; he says that nothing is hidden *except for the purpose of* (ἐὰν μὴ ἵνα) being revealed. Concealment, in this sentence, has no other reason for existing than eventual disclosure. The hidden is hidden *so that* it may be shown. That is not a platitude about truth winning out; it is a precise description of a method — a way of writing in which meaning is deliberately covered over for the very purpose of being uncovered by those who are shown how. And Mark seals it with his standing summons to the reserved reading: "if anyone has ears to hear,

let him hear" (4:23) — the formula by which, throughout this gospel, he marks the places where the surface is not the whole.

These three sentences — the mystery given to insiders, the hiding that exists for the sake of disclosure, the call to the hearing ear — are framed by the two sayings this study reads as the gospel's method in miniature. Before them stands the lamp (4:21): a light that *comes* and must not be left under the measuring-basket or the bed but set on its stand, where it gives light to all. After them stands the measure (4:24–25): "with the measure you measure it will be measured to you, and still more will be given... for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken." The lamp is the reserved sense — hidden for now, destined to be raised and seen. The measure is the economy of its disclosure — given without stint to those who have, the instructed who receive and so receive more; withdrawn from those who have not, the outsiders left with a surface that finally yields nothing. And binding the lamp to the disclosure principle is a single word: the lamp *comes* (ἔρχεται, 4:21), and the hidden thing *comes* into the open (ἔλθῃ εἰς φανερόν, 4:22) — the same verb of arrival, the light and the secret alike moving from concealment into the light.

In this one passage, then, Mark has done three things at once: declared that his teaching has an inside and an outside, declared that its concealment is purposive and aimed at disclosure, and given — in the lamp and the measure — a model of how the reserved meaning is hidden, raised, and apportioned. What the rest of this study traces is the method here announced, carried out: in the lamp, in the pairs, in the salt, in the silence of the ending. Mark told his readers, at the outset, that his gospel must be read for what it hides in order to show. We take him at his word.

A text that works this way would not have seemed strange in Mark's world, where reserved or staged disclosure was a familiar religious mode rather than an exotic one. The Greek mystery cults guarded their ἀπόρρητα, the things shown to initiates and not to be spoken abroad[11]. Jewish apocalyptic sealed its revelations and reserved their meaning for the wise. The community at Qumran read its scriptures through an interpretation it did not share with outsiders. The philosophical schools distinguished an outer teaching from an inner. These were different institutions with different contents, and the point in setting them side by side is not that Mark drew on any one of them, but that the basic structure they share — a meaning withheld from the many and disclosed to the prepared — was a recognizable feature of the religious landscape. A first-century author who built such a structure into a written gospel would have been doing something his readers had categories for.

It is necessary to distinguish this claim from an older one that has rightly fallen out of favor. An earlier generation of scholarship sought to derive early Christianity itself from the Hellenistic mystery religions, reading its sacraments and its risen Lord as borrowings from the cults of Isis, Mithras, or Dionysus. That program overreached: the alleged parallels were often loose, and the mystery sources frequently later than the Christian texts they were said to have shaped. Nothing in the present study depends on it. The claim here is not about the *origin* of Mark's content, which we locate in Paul and in the Jewish scriptures, but about the *manner* of its presentation — how the text was meant to be read and taught. Mark need not have borrowed a single idea from any mystery cult to have written a gospel that reserves its sense; he needed only to write in a mode his world already knew.

That mode, moreover, is native to the very theology this study finds in Mark. Paul — a Jew, schooled in a tradition where revelation comes as a disclosed secret — speaks habitually in just these terms: he imparts "God's wisdom in a mystery [ἐν μυστηρίῳ], the hidden wisdom" (1 Cor 2:7), gives milk to the immature and solid food to the mature, and reserves for the τέλειοι what the rest are not yet ready to hear. A gospel encoding Pauline soteriology in a reserved form is therefore not a foreign graft but the natural literary expression of a theology that already understood itself as a mystery disclosed. The single point on which everything that follows depends is this: that the surface of Mark's text can carry one meaning while holding another, and that the held meaning is completed not by the page but by the telling — an interpreter who, like the Jesus of 4:34, explains privately what was spoken openly, showing the hearer where the marked word is at home. The chapters that follow ask, case by case, where Mark has set such a word, and what its interpreter had to show.

Of Mark's competence to do this we need assume little — a writer working in Greek, who knew at least that Zechariah's two figures were *anointed* ones, a thing the Hebrew carries and the Greek does not. The chapters that follow ask, case by case, where Mark has left such a gap, and what remained for the instructor to show.

2. The Lamp That Comes

The clearest case, and the one on which the method can be most nearly tested, is the lamp. In Mark 4:21 Jesus asks, μήτι ἔρχεται ὁ λύχνος — "does the lamp come, to be put under the basket or under the bed?" The verb is ἔρχεται, *comes*.

It is worth being exact about the verb. ἔρχομαι is among the commonest in the Greek of the gospels, but overwhelmingly in its ordinary senses — to come, to go, to come about. The use here is not ordinary. The

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lexicon[1] isolates a distinct and rare sense, "to change place or position, with the implication of being brought — be brought," and finds it in only two places in the New Testament: this verse and Romans 7:9, where Paul writes that "the commandment came" (ἐλθούσης τῆς ἐντολῆς)[2]. But the two are not alike. Paul's subject is an abstraction — a commandment, arriving as concepts do in argument. Mark's is a physical object, a lamp, made to come as though under its own power. In that sense Mark's usage is not merely rare but unique: the one place in the New Testament where a concrete thing is made the subject of this coming. The commentators who render the clause "is the lamp brought in" are not wrong about the plain sense; but a lamp that "comes" is a marked construction, and the markedness is not empty.

Mark means the word to be heard two ways. On the surface it says only that the lamp comes — is brought in, set on its stand. But the reserved ear catches more, for ὁ ἐρχόμενος, "the Coming One," is in this gospel and across the tradition a title of the awaited deliverer — "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (11:9). Beneath "the lamp is brought" stands "the Coming One comes." The lamp that comes is phrased as the one who comes.

Its rarity, used in this sense, might have raised a flag with the listener too. Suppose we pick the word "approaches" as an English translation. We could say "the lion approaches its prey" or "the time approaches"; "my package approaches," however, is not wrong but it sounds a bit off. Matthew and Luke remove this oddity and make the lamp the object of a human hand — one lights it, one places it (Matt 5:15; Luke 8:16) — Mark alone lets the lamp itself come.

By itself this would be a thread too thin to pull. What gives it weight is that the same right-and-left structure that belongs to the lamp's scriptural source recurs twice more, and unmistakably: once on the road to Jerusalem, when the sons of Zebedee ask for the places at his right and left (10:35–40), and once at the crucifixion (15:27). In Zechariah 4 the prophet sees a golden lampstand flanked by two olive trees, "one on the right and one on the left" (4:3, 11), which the interpreting angel names "the two anointed ones"[3] who stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (4:14). This configuration — a lampstand, two figures at its right and left — occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew scriptures. The motif of two figures positioned right and left of a central figure, common enough in the gospels, has in the Old Testament this one home.

Mark twice puts that configuration to use. First, the sons of Zebedee ask to sit "one at your right and one at your left" in his glory (10:37) — and are refused: those places, Jesus says, are "not mine to give, but for those for whom they have been prepared" (10:40). The right and the left are reserved, withheld from the inner circle, kept for others already appointed to them. Then, at the crucifixion, the reservation is filled: "with him they crucified two bandits, one at his right and one at his left" (15:27). The places James and

John were denied are given, at the end, to two condemned men, nameless, outside the circle of the Twelve, flanking Jesus on the cross.

Read against Zechariah, the architecture completes itself. Jesus is the lamp that comes; the cross is the lampstand on which the lamp is raised up; and the two crucified beside him, lifted on their own wooden crosses at his right and his left, are the two olive trees, the anointed ones who attend the Lord of the whole earth. What the prophet saw as a single vision — a lampstand and, flanking it, two anointed attendants — Mark has distributed across his gospel: announced in the lamp that comes in chapter 4, prepared in chapter 10 where the places at the right and the left are named and reserved "for those for whom they have been prepared," and consummated at the cross in chapter 15, where the lampstand is raised and the two are set in their places.

One link in this reading is left implicit on the surface, and Mark returns, in the expansion, to supply it. The two crucified at the right and the left occupy the places "for those for whom it has been prepared" (ἡτοίμασται, 10:40); but nothing in the surface names those men as *anointed*, and it is the anointed ones of Zechariah whose places they fill. The missing term is furnished elsewhere in the gospel — and furnished, tellingly, by material this study's predecessor assigned to the expansion. At Bethany a woman pours ointment over Jesus's head, and when she is reproached he defends her on a single ground: "she has anointed my body beforehand for burial" (14:8). The anointing *is* a preparation — a preparing of the body for death. Anointing and preparation are thereby identified: to be anointed, in this gospel, is to be prepared for death, and to be prepared is to be anointed. The places at the right and the left, then, "prepared" for those who will fill them, are the *anointed* places; and the two condemned men who fill them, dying at Jesus's side, are beneath the surface the two anointed ones, the olive trees of the vision, exactly as the pattern requires.

That the term is supplied by expansion material is not an embarrassment to the reading but a confirmation of how the gospel grew. Proto-Mark laid down the architecture — the coming lamp, the reserved right and left, the crucified pair — but left "prepared" undefined, its anointed sense available to the instructed ear and unstated on the page. The expansion returned and tightened the connection, adding the Bethany anointing that makes preparation legible as anointing. The surface oddity of that scene has often been noticed: the women come to anoint Jesus at the tomb (16:1), so that his body is anointed twice, once before death and once attempted after — a redundancy on the plain reading. On the reserved reading the redundancy dissolves, for the Bethany anointing is not embalming but designation: it supplies the gospel with the word *anointed* at the hinge of the passion, and so completes, from within

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the expansion, a reserved connection the base had left for the interpreter to make. The same hand that built the lamp came back to strengthen it.

It may be objected that a cross is not an olive tree — that the identification of the crucified men's crosses with Zechariah's olive trees trades on nothing more than that both are tall wooden uprights of roughly arboreal shape. But the objection mistakes a constraint for a weakness. Mark was not free in either term. The instrument of Jesus's death had to be a cross; it was fixed by the passion he received, not chosen for its resemblance to anything. And the lamp's oil had to be olive; olive oil simply *was* what lamps burned, and Zechariah's flanking trees are olives because the lampstand they feed is fed by olives. Mark could alter neither the cross nor the olive; both were given to him. What Mark could do — and, on this reading, did — was notice that the two given things answered one another.

Now the question the method asks: "Is this an accident?" Several things must coincide for it to be. First, that Mark gave his lamp a rare and marked construction — a physical object made to "come," a usage unique to him in the New Testament. Second, that of the three Synoptics Mark alone made the lamp a subject that comes at all, where Matthew and Luke make it the object of a hand that lights and places it. Third, that he has the places at right and left sought by the inner circle and refused. Fourth, that he has those same places filled, at the crucifixion, by two condemned men. Fifth, that a doubled anointing equates "prepared" with "anointed." And sixth, that the one passage in the Hebrew scriptures uniting a lampstand with two anointed ones at right and left is the very text these features compose between them. Each is unremarkable only so long as it is taken alone. Their convergence — the lamp made to come on its own, the right and left refused, the right and left filled, prepared and anointed equated, all falling together on the single scriptural pattern that gathers them — is not what coincidence produces. The architecture is built.

And if it is built, it says something — for the content is not neutral, and at its center is an identification the whole pattern has been moving toward: the cross is the lampstand. Zechariah saw a lampstand and, flanking it, two anointed ones at the right and the left, attending the Lord of the whole earth (4:14). Mark has set that vision at Golgotha. The upright cross is the stand; the two crucified at Jesus's right and left are the two anointed ones — "those for whom it has been prepared" (10:40), occupying now the anointed ones' places; their crosses the olive trees; and the figure they flank, the crucified man between them, is the one Zechariah calls the Lord of all the earth.

This is why the lamp of the early saying *comes* and is raised: the lamp announced in chapter 4, which must not stay hidden under basket or bed but be set upon its stand, is set upon its stand at the cross.

The reading, once made, gathers the gospel's deepest reversals into one image. The places of honor at the Lord's right and left, sought by the leaders of the Twelve and denied them, are filled by two condemned outsiders — the judgment the gospel passes everywhere on the apostolic circle. The lampstand of the vision, the sacred light-bearer of the temple, one of the holiest furnishings of the temple cult, is now the wood of an execution — the cult's light displaced by the cross. And the man who hangs there as a criminal is declared, in the silent grammar of the pattern, the Lord of all the earth, the nations included, not of Israel alone. The instructed reader, shown the figure, sees at the cross what the uninstructed sees only as two criminals incidentally present: the lampstand raised, its two anointed ones in place, and between them, lifted up to give light to the world, the Lord of the whole earth.

3. The Measure (Mark 4:24–25)

The basket under which the lamp was not to be hidden was a measuring-basket, the μόδιος — and the measure is what the next saying takes up, joining the two by more than proximity. Having stated that nothing is concealed except to be revealed, Mark turns at once to the terms on which the revelation is received: "Take heed what you hear. With the measure you measure, it will be measured to you, and more will be added to you. For to the one who has, more will be given; and from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away" (4:24–25).

On the surface this is a proverb about receptivity, or about generosity returned in kind — give much, get much. Read as the sequel to the disclosure-saying it follows, it is something more exact: it is the economy of the mystery, the rule governing who receives the hidden thing now being brought to light, and in what amount. What one "hears" is the reserved teaching; the "measure" one brings to it is the measure of one's receptivity, the openness with which one takes what is disclosed. To the one who brings that measure, more is given — the more he receives, the more is opened to him. And the second half is sharper than a proverb about generosity would ever be: from the one who has not, *even what he has is taken away*. The outsider, who brings no receptivity, is left not merely without the reserved sense but, in the end, without even the surface — for a surface whose meaning has been withheld yields, on its own, nothing. The instructed are given more and more; the uninstructed lose even what they seemed to hold.

What it is that one will receive, the saying does not here say. But once the preceding lamp parable is decoded, the most obvious candidate is the light of Christ. It may also point to the Holy Spirit: the later gospel of John joins the two explicitly, saying God 'gives the Spirit without measure' (οὐ… ἐκ μέτρου δίδωσιν τὸ πνεῦμα, 3:34). Here it is enough that Mark has stated the principle: the reserved meaning is not

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distributed evenly. It is apportioned by the measure each brings, given without stint to those who can receive it and withdrawn from those who cannot — the same two-level economy the whole gospel runs on, stated in the abstract before it is filled with its content.

Matthew, characteristically, empties it. He takes the measure-saying out of Mark's discourse on hidden and disclosed and sets it down in the Sermon on the Mount, in the midst of teaching about judging others: "with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you measure it will be measured to you" (Matt 7:1–2). The measure is no longer the receptivity by which one takes the mystery; it is the severity with which one judges a neighbor. The saying that in Mark governs the disclosure of a reserved salvation becomes, in Matthew, a rule of ethical reciprocity — exactly the transformation he works on the salt, and on the lamp: the reserved soteriology lifted out and a plain morality set in its place. That Matthew should three times perform the same operation — on the lamp, the measure, and the salt, three Markan sayings we have identified as load-bearing — is itself a sign that he found in them a common thing to neutralize.

4. The Seed That Grows in Secret

One more saying belongs to this cluster, and it follows hard on the measure. Mark alone preserves it — Luke does not have it, and Matthew has something very different for it — and it is, on its surface, the slightest of parables: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow — he knows not how. The earth bears fruit of itself: first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he sends in the sickle, for the harvest has come" (4:26–29).

The parable says, in the plainest terms, that the decisive thing happens *unseen and of itself*. The sower scatters and then withdraws into the ordinary round of sleeping and waking; the growth proceeds without him, by a power he neither supplies nor understands — "he knows not how." The word Mark uses for it is αὐτομάτη: the earth bears fruit *automatically*, of its own accord. And the parable does not leave the hidden thing hidden forever: it ends at the harvest, when the ripe grain stands ready and the sickle comes (an image that carries the apocalyptic charge of Joel 3:13, "put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe"). This is the same shape as the lamp and the disclosure-saying that precede it — a thing that works concealed and is manifested only in its time. But where the lamp reserves a *meaning*, the seed states the *principle* of the reserve itself: that the real working is hidden now and disclosed at its harvest. It is the reserve describing its own shape, in the abstract.

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And that shape is Paul's. When Paul wanted to say how the work of the gospel actually advances, he reached for precisely this image and precisely this point: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth [ὁ… αὐξάνων]; so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor 3:6–7). Mark's sower who "knows not how" and Paul's planter who "is nothing" are the same figure, making the same confession — that the growth of the kingdom is by a power not human and not earned. And Paul, in the same passage, does not stop at "God gives the growth." A few verses on, the metaphor turns from field to building and then names what the growing power is: "you are God's temple, and God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor 3:16). The increase that is God's and not the planter's is, by the end of Paul's own argument, the indwelling Spirit.

Read along that thread, the seed that grows of itself in Mark is the hidden working of the Spirit — the life that is in the seed and not in the sower, given and not achieved. The parable, on this reading, is the narrative form of the Pauline principle that salvation comes by grace and not by works: the field yields of its own accord, the laborer's striving notwithstanding, because the life is in the seed and the giving is God's.

This is, admittedly, reading here a lot that is not stated. We can't know for certain what the informed interpreter would have provided. The last step — from the hidden growth to the Spirit that works it — the parable does not mark. There is only one faintly marked word, αὐτομάτη, "of its own accord," rare enough in the New Testament to appear elsewhere only of the prison gate that opens by itself for Peter (Acts 12:10)[4]. The reading rests on the shape of the parable, on its position following the lamp and the measure, and on Paul's thread, not on a coded word. It is offered as a plausible continuation of the material that preceded it — and it is worth noting that the Spirit has now surfaced as the reserved candidate twice in this cluster, at the measure and here (also see §9.2 where the Spirit is again a promising candidate)[5]. The recurrence is suggestive, and it points in a single direction: the Holy Spirit.

Matthew, characteristically, did not discard the secret seed but recast it. In the parable chapter that gathers his Markan parable-material, the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24–30) stands exactly where Mark's secret seed stands in the sequence — after the sower and its sequels, immediately before the shared mustard seed — and keeps its distinctive frame of a man who sows and then sleeps while the growth proceeds without him. But the point is inverted in Matthew's usual manner. Both parables end at a harvest; the difference is what the harvest discloses. Mark's harvest manifests the hidden grace — the grain that grew of itself now standing ripe. Matthew's harvest executes judgment: the wheat and the

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weeds grow together until a reaping that sorts the righteous from "the sons of the evil one." The grace-parable is remade into a judgment-parable.

5. The Pairs and Their Reserve

Our previous study[2] argued that canonical Mark is built, in part, out of matched pairs — episodes doubled, an inherited member facing Israel and an added member turning to the nations. The argument there was source-critical: the pairs were identified by formal means, and the second member of each proved, on inspection, to be the one Luke lacks and the one keyed to Isaiah's new Exodus. What was treated there as evidence of *composition* is taken up here for a different property, the one that matters for an esoteric reading: the pairs do not explain themselves. Their meaning is carried beneath the surface, and Mark expects it to be supplied.

Four such pairs were drawn out. There are the two feedings — five thousand fed in Jewish country with five loaves and two fish (the same five and two as the wilderness manna, five days' portion and the sixth day's double), twelve baskets gathered for the twelve tribes; and four thousand fed toward the Gentile side, seven loaves and seven baskets for the seventy nations — the same act performed twice, its doubling pointless on the surface and pregnant beneath it. There are the two sea-crossings, the storm stilled and the walking on the water, the first deliverance and the new. There are the Twelve appointed and the Twelve sent. And there are the two healings of the senses, the only two cures Mark works with spittle, opening sight and opening hearing — Israel's eyes and the nations' ears. In each, the surface shows a duplication a plain reader would think redundant; the sense lies in the pattern the duplication makes, and the pattern is not stated.

That is the crucial point for what follows. Mark nowhere tells the reader, on the page, that the two feedings are Israel and the nations, that the twelve baskets are the tribes and the seven the peoples, that the second sea-crossing is Isaiah's new Exodus. He lays the pairs down and leaves them. And we know he did not think the pattern self-evident, because he shows us the very witnesses of the feedings failing to read it: "do you not yet understand?" Jesus asks the Twelve, who had gathered the baskets with their own hands and still could not say what the gathering meant (8:17–21).

The pairs are one of the clearest cases, before we ever reach the salt, of Mark's settled manner — a surface that withholds, a meaning that must be brought to it. What the pairs do across the whole gospel, leaving a pattern unsaid, the salt will do at its center, and in a smaller compass. It is to the salt that we now turn.

6. Salt: A Loaded Substance

Mark did not choose salt at random for the center of his reserved theology. In the world he wrote for, salt was among the most heavily freighted of substances — sacral, covenantal, and incorruptible — and a brief account of what it carried will show how much was available to a writer who made it his figure.

Salt's deepest association in the Jewish scriptures is with the covenant. Three times the texts speak of a "covenant of salt": the grain offering must never lack "the salt of the covenant of your God" (Lev 2:13); the priestly portion is "a perpetual covenant of salt" (Num 18:19); the kingship of David and his sons is held "by a covenant of salt" (2 Chr 13:5). In each, the meaning is the same — an *indissoluble* bond, perpetual and incorruptible, salt standing for what does not decay. The logic was natural in the ancient world: salt preserves what would otherwise rot, and so became the emblem of permanence. It seemed, indeed, to be itself indestructible — dissolved in water and recovered unchanged, surviving the fire that consumed everything else — and this apparent incorruptibility made it a fitting sign of a covenant meant never to fail. The same association gave salt its role in hospitality and alliance: to share salt was to enter a bond, so that "to eat a man's salt" sealed a sacred tie between host and guest, and "salted with the salt of the palace" (Ezra 4:14) meant bound in fidelity to the king.

Above all, salt belonged to sacrifice. Leviticus requires it of every offering — "with all your offerings you shall offer salt" (Lev 2:13) — and it is this requirement that matters most for what follows. Salt was not itself the sacrifice; it was what *qualified* the sacrifice, the added thing that made the offering acceptable to God. The worshiper brought the victim; the salt of the covenant made it fit to be received. This relation — salt as that which renders an offering acceptable — is the hinge on which Mark's salt theology will turn, and it was wholly familiar to anyone who knew the Levitical cult.

The wider culture only deepened the charge. The Greeks reckoned salt a thing dear to the gods, a divine substance, and its incorruptibility carried something of the eternal; it was besides a commodity of real value, the stuff of bonds and oaths across the ancient Mediterranean[12]. None of this is needed for the argument, but all of it stands behind the word: when Mark reaches for salt, he reaches for a substance already saturated with covenant, sacrifice, permanence, and acceptability before God.

That this charge passed into specifically *Christian* usage is the last and most pertinent point, for it shows that "the salt of Christ" was not a private coinage but a category the early church came to know. Augustine recalls being marked with the cross and "seasoned with his salt" (*condiebar eius sale*) from his mother's womb — a salt of Christ administered, like the cross, in the rites of Christian beginning[9]. The

connection of salt with baptism recurs in the early church. More strikingly, among Jewish-Christian groups east of the Jordan — those the Clementine literature reflects, with Ebionite affinities — there is evidence of a Eucharist of bread and *salt* rather than bread and wine, salt standing where the blood of the covenant would later stand. And the Mandaeans, a small baptizing community of debated but evidently ancient origin, hold all things subject to ritual purification save one: salt alone is reckoned already pure[13]. Across these scattered witnesses, salt keeps its old sacral weight and acquires a new Christological one. When this study argues that Mark built a mystery on the salt of Jesus, it is arguing that he gave deliberate, reserved form to an association that surfaced, elsewhere and later, in the open practice of the church.

6.1. Reading the Text as Mark Wrote It

Before the salt sayings can be read, they must be recovered from the form in which they ordinarily reach us, for the divisions of the passage, its printed punctuation, and the available translations work, in different ways, to hide what Mark put there.

The first thing to recover is the unity of the speech. From John's question at 9:38 to the final imperative at 9:50, Mark gives a single, unbroken discourse in the mouth of Jesus. The chapter-and-verse divisions that parcel it into separate sayings — the exorcist, the cup of water, the millstone, the three amputations, the three Gehenna warnings, the salting with fire, the salt proverb, the closing imperative — are not Mark's. They are later impositions, and they are not neutral ones: they reflect, in good part, the way Matthew and Luke broke the material up and redistributed it across their own gospels. To read Mark's speech through divisions retrojected from what the later evangelists did with its pieces is to read it through their dismemberment of it. Read instead as Mark wrote it — one continuous argument — the passage moves from the validation of those who act in Jesus's name, through the stakes of judgment, to the salt in which judgment is transformed, as a single sustained thought.

The conventional punctuation obscures the most important joint in that thought. Modern texts and translations place a period, a full stop, after "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (9:48) — and so set the salt material that follows apart as a fresh and seemingly unconnected saying. But the next clause opens with γάρ: πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἁλισθήσεται, "for everyone will be salted with fire" (9:49). The γάρ is a connective of reason: it makes the unquenchable fire just described the very fire of the salting, the ground of the statement that follows. The fire of Gehenna and the fire that salts are, by Mark's own conjunction, one fire. To break the sentence before γάρ — as the printed punctuation does — is to sever

exactly the link on which the passage turns, leaving the salting to float free of the fire that explains it. Remove the imposed stop, let the γάρ do its work, and the terrible fire of the warnings becomes the purifying fire of sacrifice in a single, continuous motion.

From this recovered text the reading proceeds, and three of its words must be heard as Mark's Greek carries them but English cannot reproduce.

The first is the verb of the salting itself. ἁλισθήσεται, "will be salted" (9:49), is — as §6.2 will set out and §6.4 will build upon — a form with one home in the Greek scriptures: the covenant-of-salt verse of Leviticus (2:13), whose wording and clause-shape Mark's sentence reproduces. In English the word is an ordinary verb; in Mark's Greek it is a citation.

The second is the climactic salt. The standard critical text — read against the later Byzantine smoothing, and on the manuscript evidence set out below — carries at the saying's final word not the regular ἅλας but the marked ἄλα, a form anchored, in the earliest recoverable state of the text, at precisely the point where the proverb turns into address. What that form is, and where it comes from, is the question of §6.2; here it is enough that it is not the word of Mark's own neighboring clauses.

The third is the phrase ἐν τίνι in the question "in what will it be seasoned?" (9:50). Its natural surface sense is instrumental — "with what will you season it?" — and so the versions always render it. But the surface is not the whole. Through the lines just before, the speech has rung the change on a single pattern — the name of Jesus joined to a person, four times across five verses: "in my name" (9:37), "in your name" (9:38), "in my name" (9:39), "in the name" (9:41) — and it has sealed the pattern with a formula: ὅτι Χριστοῦἐστε, "because you are Christ's" (9:41). A hearer who has been carried through that refrain of the name, and brought to rest on the belonging of the hearers to Christ, does not arrive at ἐν τίνι hearing only "with what"; the question stands open to "in whom" — and answers itself from the refrain that prepared it: in Christ, in his name, in his person. The grammar permits both; the context licenses the second; and the saying is built to hold them at once.

This is why these sayings cannot be carried into English intact, and the loss is of two kinds. The first two words translation simply erases: English has one verb where Mark has a citation, and one noun where Mark has two — the choice of ἄλα over ἅλας, the whole Septuagintal signature folded into a single accusative, leaves no trace in any rendering; "salted" and "salt" are all a translator can print, and the allusion dies on the page. The third, translation is forced to resolve: a version must print either "with what" or "in whom," and whichever it prints, the other is lost. The reserve does not survive translation not because translators have erred but because in the one case English lacks the distinction and in the

other it must decide what the Greek declines to decide. In the Greek the two readings coexist in one set of words, the open sense available to every hearer and the disclosed sense delivered, in the interpretation, to those prepared to receive it. It is in that reserved space — between an ordinary verb and a citation, between salt and the salt of the covenant, between "with what" and "in whom" — that the argument of the following sections lives.

6.2. Have ἅλα in You: The Salt of the Covenant

The closing imperative of the sequence, ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἅλα (9:50), reaches at its climax for a conspicuously marked form. The accusative of the neuter τὸ ἅλας is ἅλας— neuter nouns of this class take the same form in the accusative as in the nominative[6] — and Mark writes that nominative twice in the same verse. What he writes as the object of his imperative is ἅλα. The form admits two parsings. The standard lexicon, treating it under the neuter noun, pauses to account for it "prob. a back-formation fr. ἁλατ on the model of σῶμα, σώματος"[7] — an analogical by-product, intelligible but secondary. But ἅλα is also, and without any analogy to explain it, the perfectly regular accusative of the older noun ὁ ἅλς — the word for salt that the neuter ἅλας was in the process of displacing, and the word the Greek scriptures had used before the displacement was complete. On the first parsing the form is an anomaly; on the second it is an archaism with a home. Which parsing is right for Mark is the question this section answers, and the answer will come from the Septuagint. On either parsing, one thing is already fixed: measured against Mark's own neighboring clauses, the form is marked.

That Mark wrote ἅλα here, and here only, is clear from the manuscripts.[8] In Vaticanus and several other witnesses the two proverb-clauses keep the regular nominative ἅλας and only the accusative object reads ἅλα. Other witnesses generalize ἅλα backward into the earlier clauses, an assimilation that presupposes the form was already fixed at the climax. At the rhetorical hinge of his most theologically loaded sequence, Mark declines the ordinary word and reaches for the marked one.

That the form is genuinely marked, rather than a spelling indifferent to its readers, is confirmed from two directions: the lexicon pauses to derive it, and — as the manuscript evidence shows[9] — ancient scribes repeatedly smoothed it away. The first correctors of both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus took the trouble to change it back to ἅλας. Scribes normalize toward the ordinary form, not away from it; the correction is testimony from readers far closer to the language than we are that ἅλα, in this slot, was not the ordinary word. For those correctors the old ἅλς was dead, and what they saw was an error to be mended. What they mended, this section will argue, was a citation.

Three explanations might account for the form innocently. The first two fail outright; the third fails in a more instructive way — it succeeds as morphology and fails as innocence.

The first is that ἅλα is simply the regular accusative of Mark's noun. It is not: the neuter takes the accusative in the same form as the nominative, and Mark writes that nominative, ἅλας, twice in the same verse.

The second is that Mark habitually declined the noun this way — that for him the word went on the γάλα model, nominative and accusative alike in -α.[10] Had that been so, he would have written ἅλα in the proverb-clauses as well, for that is what the paradigm gives. He does not. Whatever the form is, it is not Mark's habitual declension.

The third explanation is the serious one: that ἅλα is an ordinary variant Mark picked up from use — a speaker straddling two byforms of one word, as Koine speakers did, mixing them without design. Here the right answer is not denial, for the byform is real; the right answer is to ask where the byform lived. And in the scriptures Mark's gospel breathes, the accusative ἅλα lives above all in one verse — the verse this whole discourse has been quoting.

Leviticus 2:13 in the Greek reads: πᾶν δῶρον θυσίας ὑμῶν ἁλὶ ἁλισθήσεται· οὐ διαπαύσετε ἅλα διαθήκης κυρίου ἀπὸ θυσιασμάτων ὑμῶν· ἐπὶ παντὸς δώρου ὑμῶν προσοίσετε κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ὑμῶν ἅλας[14] — "every gift of your sacrifice shall be salted with salt; you shall not let the salt of the covenant of the Lord cease from your sacrifices; with every gift of yours you shall offer to the Lord your God salt." Three things in this one verse bear directly on Mark's two verses.

The first is the verb. ἁλισθήσεται, "shall be salted," is a hapax form in the Septuagint: the verb ἁλίζω occurs in the whole Greek Old Testament only twice, and this exact future passive only here.[11] Mark 9:49 — πᾶς γὰρ πυρὶ ἁλισθήσεται — reproduces it verbatim, in the same clause-shape, πᾶς with a dative and the verb, πυρί standing where ἁλί stood. The verse that opens Mark's salt sequence is built, word and syntax, on the one verse of his Bible that contains this verb.

The second is the accusative. Within Lev 2:13 itself, both accusatives of salt occur, and they are distributed by function: the old ἅλα stands inside the covenant phrase — ἅλα διαθήκης, "the salt of the covenant" — while the neuter ἅλας stands as the plain object of the offering command. One verse, both forms, the archaic form in the covenant slot.

The third is Mark's mirror of that distribution. Across 9:49–50 Mark sounds the salt five times — ἁλισθήσεται, ἅλας, ἅλας, ἅναλον, ἅλα — and his two accusative-slot forms divide exactly as Leviticus

divides them: the neuter ἅλας in the general proverb, the old ἅλα as the object of the climactic imperative. The mixture that the third explanation would attribute to a speaker's indifference tracks, form for form and function for function, the distribution of the source verse. A byform is innocently in a writer's text when it arrives from common use; it is not innocently there when its home in his scriptures is the verse he has just quoted, and when he deploys it in the same slot his source does. The third explanation thus resolves the morphology and, in resolving it, surrenders the innocence: ἅλα is not an anomaly signaling that something has gone wrong with the Greek, but an archaism signaling where the Greek comes from. It is the ἅλα of ἅλα διαθήκης.

On its surface the imperative says what any moralizing reader would take it to say. ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἅλα — "have salt among yourselves" — is an ethical instruction continuous with the proverb that precedes it (καλὸν τὸ ἅλας, "salt is good"): keep the savor, preserve the bond of fellowship, be at peace with one another, as the following clause makes explicit. Read this way the salt is a quality the community maintains, and the saying asks nothing that those outside could not absorb as general wisdom. Nothing on the surface disturbs them; in translation, nothing can — English has one word where Mark has two, and "salt" is all a version can print.

The disclosed reading emerges when the hearer is shown where the word is at home. ἅλα is the accusative of the older ἅλς — the form the Greek Torah sets inside the covenant phrase itself, ἅλα διαθήκης (Lev 2:13), in the very verse whose hapax verb Mark has just sounded at 9:49. Shown this, the sentence turns from moral maintenance to participation. The salt is no longer a property the congregation generates among themselves but the covenant-salt — the thing that made an offering acceptable to God — now to be in them; and ἐν ἑαυτοῖς shifts accordingly from "among yourselves" to "within you." Have the salt of the covenant in you: and whose covenant it now is, the discourse has been saying since 9:38 in every ringing of the name, and the supper will say without reserve — τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης (14:24), the covenant no longer of salt but of blood, no longer Levitical but his.

Surface saying and disclosed saying occupy the same written words, and only the interpretation, delivered to those prepared to receive it, separates them. This is the salt mystery's mechanism in miniature — not a cipher awaiting a key, but a citation awaiting a reader: a sentence whose final word is at home in one verse of the scriptures, placed where only the hearer who is shown that home will hear what the sentence is holding. The scribes who corrected ἅλα to ἅλας show what became of the sentence when the home was forgotten; the reading offered here is what the sentence says when the home is restored.

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6.3. The Two Readings, Set Side by Side

Read on the surface, the close of the discourse is a string of loosely connected salt-proverbs:

"And if your eye makes you stumble, tear it out; better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to be thrown with both eyes into Gehenna, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt loses its saltiness, with what will you season it? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

It is hard to say, on this reading, what the salt sayings are doing there at all, or why three of them stand together — a difficulty we will return to.

Read as the interpreter would have disclosed it, the same words carry a continuous argument, which may be set out with the withheld senses supplied in parentheses:

"...whoever welcomes one such child *in my name* welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons *in your name*, and because he was not following us, we tried to stop him." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him. No one who does a work of power *in my name* will be able soon after to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. And whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because *you belong to Christ*, will certainly not lose his reward. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a donkey-millstone around his neck. And if your hand makes you stumble, cut it off; better to enter life maimed than to go with both hands into Gehenna, into the fire that is never quenched. And if your foot makes you stumble, cut it off; better to enter life lame than to be thrown with both feet into Gehenna. And if your eye makes you stumble, tear it out; better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to be thrown with both eyes into Gehenna, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched — for everyone will be salted with fire (ἁλισθήσεται — Leviticus's own word, from the one verse of the scriptures that carries it: the fire that, for those who bear the covenant-salt, is the fire of sacrifice that makes the offering acceptable to God). Salt is good (the old covenant of salt, the bond that made worship acceptable to God, was good). But if the salt becomes saltless (if it loses the power to make an offering acceptable), in whom (ἐν τίνι) will it be seasoned? (— and salt seasoned again is covenant renewed; the question answers itself from the refrain just heard: in Christ, whose name has rung through the speech, whose the hearers are). Have salt in you (ἅλα — the salt of the covenant, ἅλα διαθήκης, the salt that makes one acceptable to God) and be at peace with one another."

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What the surface presents as miscellany the disclosed reading presents as a single movement from judgment to acceptance. The section that follows unfolds it.

6.4. The Pauline Soteriology of Mark 9:38–50

Read in the reserved manner established earlier, the whole of 9:38–50 is a complete and pastorally urgent statement of justification — not by apostolic standing, but by participation in Christ. Its parts cohere into one argument.

It opens by validating those outside the apostolic circle. John reports an exorcist casting out demons "in your name" who does not follow the apostolic group, and is told to leave him be: "the one who is not against us is for us" (9:38–40). This is the gospel's narrative defense of communities working in Jesus's name without apostolic authorization — the very situation Paul defends against the Jerusalem pillars. The pattern that carries it — the name of Jesus joined to a person — is struck here and sounded four times across five verses (9:37, 38, 39, 41),[12] and it closes on a formula: the cup of water given ὅτι Χριστοῦἐστε, "because you are Christ's" (9:41). The predicate genitive of belonging to an absolute Χριστός is Paul's own idiom for participation — ὑμεῖς δὲ Χριστοῦ (1 Cor 3:23), εἰ δὲὑμεῖς Χριστοῦ (Gal 3:29), Χριστοῦ εἶναι (2 Cor 10:7; cf. Rom 8:9) — and 9:41 is arguably its one Synoptic occurrence. The refrain of the name, sealed by the formula of belonging, is laid down deliberately, for it is what the climax will draw upon.

The stakes are then raised to their highest pitch. Three escalating warnings invoke Gehenna, closing on "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (9:42–48). The fire of final judgment is established with maximum urgency — and it is established, by the γάρ that opens 9:49, as the very fire of the salting that follows. From terror the sequence turns, in one motion, to assurance.

The first of the salt sayings, "For everyone will be salted with fire" (9:49), arrives on the heels of the most fearful image in the gospel, and the γάρ binds the two together: the fire that salts is the fire just described. Then, in the next breath, "Salt is good." A hearer who has followed the surface is meant to be brought up short. We have been at hellfire; how is salt now good?

The incongruity is the door into the meaning, and Mark has hung the door on a single word. ἁλισθήσεται, "will be salted," has one home in the Greek scriptures: the verb ἁλίζω occurs in the Septuagint only twice, and this exact future passive only once — at Leviticus 2:13, where every gift of sacrifice ἁλὶἁλισθήσεται, "shall be salted with salt": the verse of the salt of the covenant, without which no offering may be made. Mark reproduces the form verbatim, in the same clause-shape — πᾶς with a dative and the verb — with πυρί, the fire, standing where ἁλί, the salt, stood. The sentence that opens the salt sequence is built, word

and syntax, on the one verse of Mark's Bible that carries this verb; the verse stands cited before the salt sayings even begin, ready for the interpreter who will unfold it. And in that verse, salt and fire are not opposites but partners in a single act. The burnt offering is wholly consumed by fire on the altar — and it is salt that qualifies it, the salt of the covenant. The salted victim is the burned victim; the fire does not destroy it but takes it up, sends it to God as a sacrifice he receives. Fire and salt together make the offering acceptable: the fire consumes, the salt consecrates, and what ascends is received.

The citation was heard anciently. Some witnesses add to 9:49 the gloss "and every sacrifice will be salted with salt" — importing not Leviticus generally but the wording of the one verse Mark's verb is drawn from, the copyists restoring the source's dative around the source's own verb.[13] The reading offered here is not a modern imposition on the verse; it is what the earliest readers who left a trace of their understanding took the verse to mean — and their trace points where Mark's word already pointed.

Read against that, the sequence resolves. The fire of 9:49 is universal — everyone will be salted with fire — and it is the fire of judgment and of death, which no one escapes. But fire is two things at once, depending on what passes through it.[14] To unsalted matter it is mere destruction, the Gehenna that consumes and does not receive. To the salted it is the altar-fire that consecrates, the death by which an offering is given to God and taken up. Everyone goes into the fire; the salt is what determines which fire it proves to be. And so "salt is good" is no reversal but the point: salt is good because salt is the thing that turns the universal fire from destruction into sacrifice.

What, then, is the salt? Here the surface gives out and the word itself answers: the ἅλα Mark reaches for at the imperative is the ἅλα of ἅλα διαθήκης — the salt of the covenant, in the accusative of the very verse his verb is drawn from (§6.2)[15] — the thing that made an offering acceptable to God. And whose covenant it now is, the gospel discloses: participation in Christ. To have the salt is to be in him; and to be in him is to make one's passage through the fire of death the death he died, an offering presented and accepted rather than fuel consumed.

Two things, on this reading, unlock the passage: the salt of Leviticus, which makes fire and salt partners rather than opposites, and Paul's idiom of the body presented as an offering — the believer's death folded into Christ's and so made a sacrifice God receives, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12:1). The parallel with Romans is one of theology, not of language: Mark nowhere quotes Paul, and Paul nowhere speaks of salt. What they share is the logic — the listener is equated with a sacrificial offering and dying in Christ turns death into an offering — and it is that logic the salt carries. But the pericope is not without Paul's language altogether: the belonging-formula

Χριστοῦἐστε (9:41) stands three verses upstream of the salt, naming in Paul's own idiom the participation the salt will figure.

The salted are those who die in Christ, whose dying is therefore a sacrifice that ascends; the unsalted go into the same fire with nothing to consecrate them, and are not taken up but destroyed. "Everyone will be salted with fire" means everyone must pass through the fire of death — and the whole of salvation hangs on whether one carries into it the salt, the being-in-Christ, that makes the fire an altar rather than a Gehenna.

The proverb that follows turns on the same axis. "Salt is good" honors the old covenant of salt — the bond that once made worship acceptable through the sacrificial system. Then: "but if the salt becomes saltless" (ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας ἄναλον γένηται) — and on the Levitical logic just established, for salt to lose its saltness is precisely for it to lose its power to make an offering acceptable. The question that follows is then not idle: ἐν τίνι αὐτὸ ἀρτύσετε; The construction will bear the instrumental sense, "with what will you season it?" — and that is how it is normally read. But the refrain that governs the whole unit has been joining the name of Jesus to persons since 9:37, and has just sealed itself in the formula of belonging. Read with that refrain, the question asks in whom the salt will be seasoned again — and salt restored to its power is, on the logic just established, covenant renewed — and it answers itself: in him, whose the hearers are. That Mark shaped the question so, rather than receiving it already shaped from the proverb tradition, follows from the priority of his form of the saying, argued in §7.[16]

The salt and the blood do the same Levitical work — each makes the offering acceptable — and so the salt of chapter 9 points forward to its open disclosure at the supper, where the cup is "my blood of the covenant" (τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης, 14:24). What is reserved under the salt in chapter 9 is spoken plainly over the cup in chapter 14: the covenant renewed in Christ's own offering, taken into those who receive it.

The whole of 9:38–50 is thus a single argument, and its shape is a soteriology. It opens by validating those who act in Jesus's name outside the apostolic circle — "the one who is not against us is for us." It raises the stakes to the fire of judgment. And it resolves the terror into assurance: the salt of the covenant, received by being in him and not by standing among the pillars — and not, as Matthew's answering Sermon will make the quarrel explicit (§8.1), by works of righteousness — turns the fire that takes everyone into the altar-fire that consecrates rather than the Gehenna that destroys. What a gospel exists to proclaim — how a man is saved — Mark does not set on the surface in a sermon; he builds it into the salt, on the one verse of his scriptures his own verb cites and his own copyists confirm they heard, and

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discloses it, to those prepared, in the reading. The three salt sayings are not a miscellany. They are the center of the gospel's reserve, and what they reserve is justification by participation in Christ.

6.5. After the Salt: The Covenant of Marriage (Mark 10:1–12)

The salt sequence may not close at 9:50. What follows it, at once, is a teaching on marriage — the one-flesh union that God joins and no one may separate (10:1–12) — and this section argues that the juxtaposition is deliberate: that the covenant of salt and the covenant of marriage are two figures of one covenant, set side by side by the same hand, and joined beneath the surface by the same rare verb. Both members sit in proto-Mark on the criteria of the previous study[2]. The claim must be graded honestly at the outset. There is no γάρ at 10:1 as there is at 9:49; there is instead a genuine change of scene, a departure for Judea and new crowds. What is claimed is therefore sequence, not syntax — that Mark placed the marriage teaching here — and sequence-evidence is weaker in kind than the conjunction-evidence on which 6.1 recovered the unity of the discourse. But arrangement is how this gospel is generally agreed to argue, and this particular arrangement has an anchor in the scriptures that can be checked.

The anchor is the verb of 9:49. ἁλίζω, whose future passive Mark lifts verbatim from Lev 2:13 (§6.4), occurs in the whole Septuagint exactly twice, and its second and only other home is Ezekiel 16:4 — in the identical collocation: ἁλὶ ἡλίσθης, "you were not salted with salt," as Lev 2:13 has ἁλὶἁλισθήσεται.[17] And Ezekiel 16 is not a stray occurrence; it is the one text in the Greek scriptures where salt, covenant, marriage, breach, and renewal form a single narrative. It opens with “Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her loathsome practices!” Then the infant Jerusalem, on the day of her birth, is not washed and not salted (16:4) — unsalted, unqualified, owed nothing; the Lord passes by and says to her, "from your blood, life" (ἐκ τοῦ αἵματός σου ζωή, 16:6)[18]; grown, she is taken in marriage by covenant — "I swore to you and entered into covenant with you, says the Lord, and you became mine" (εἰσῆλθον ἐν διαθήκῃ μετὰ σοῦ… καὶ ἐγένου μοι, 16:8)[14]; she breaks the covenant (16:59); and the chapter ends with the Lord renewing it unilaterally — "I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your infancy, and I will raise up for you an everlasting covenant" (16:60, 62). The interpreter who traced the verb of 9:49 to its home in Leviticus and asked, with 9:50, in whom the failed salt can be seasoned again, finds in the verb's only other home that question answered as a story: the unsalted one, taken into covenant-marriage by grace and not desert, the covenant broken and then raised again everlasting — by the Lord's act, not hers. Even the covenant's closing formula, ἐγένου μοι, "you became mine," is the idiom of belonging on which the salt discourse turned at 9:41: Χριστοῦἐστε, you are his.[19]

Read with that text in the ear, the teaching that follows the salt stops looking like a change of subject. On its surface, Mark 10:1–12 is a halakhic dispute: Pharisees testing, Moses cited, a certificate of divorce debated — a controversy any hearer could follow, and the kind the public scene is built to carry. And the center of the teaching is covenant. Jesus answers Moses with Genesis: "the two shall become one flesh… what therefore God has joined together (συνέζευξεν), let no one separate" (10:6–9, citing Gen 2:24). Marriage, in this teaching, is not a contract men make and unmake with certificates; it is a joining God effects — which is what a covenant is. The prophets had already fused the terms: Malachi's indictment of divorce names the abandoned wife γυνὴ διαθήκης σου, "the wife of your covenant," and κοινωνός σου, "your partner" (Mal 2:14)[14] — divorce prosecuted as covenant-breach, in a text about the very question the Pharisees raise. To ask about divorce, in the scriptures this gospel breathes, is to ask about breaking covenant; and Mark has the question asked in the first breath after the imperative to have the covenant-salt within.

That the one-flesh text carried, in Mark's own circle, precisely the disclosed sense this study has been tracing, the Pauline literature attests directly. Ephesians quotes the same verse Mark quotes — Gen 2:24, "the two shall become one flesh" — and says of it: τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν, "this mystery is great," and I speak of Christ and the church (Eph 5:31–32).[20] The word is Mark's own word for the reserved teaching (τὸ μυστήριον, 4:11), applied in the Pauline mission to the very proof-text of Mark 10. And 1 Corinthians takes the one-flesh text as the grammar of union with Christ himself: "the one joined to the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:16–17), with the community betrothed "to one husband" (2 Cor 11:2). In the circle from which this gospel comes, the one-flesh verse was already the participation verse. Mark did not need to invent the disclosed sense of his marriage teaching; he needed only to place the teaching where the salt had prepared its hearing.

The chapter's architecture, on this reading, is two covenant arcs that interlock. The covenant as sacrifice: the ἅλα διαθήκης of 9:49–50, disclosed at the supper as τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης (14:24). The covenant as marriage: the bridegroom announced and his taking-away foretold (2:19–20); the one-flesh joining that God effects, taught on the heels of the covenant-salt (10:6–9); and the betrothal-stone rolled from the tomb (16:1–8; §10). Ezekiel 16 is the text that holds both arcs in one hand — the salt, the covenant, the marriage, the blood in which there is life, the breach, and the renewal — and the verb of 9:49 is the hinge on which Mark hangs them side by side.

There is a redactional confirmation, and it is Luke's. His great wedge — the travel narrative — enters exactly at this joint: he follows Mark's order to the exorcist (Luke 9:49–50 = Mark 9:38–40), opens the

wedge at 9:51, and rejoins Mark's order at the children (Luke 18:15 = Mark 10:13). The block his insertion severs from its Markan setting is not the salt sequence alone but 9:41–10:12 entire — the covenant-salt and the covenant-marriage together. And the two covenant-carriers reappear inside the wedge denatured in parallel ways: the salt at 14:34–35, the mocking form the sayings source built on Mark's opening (§8.2); the divorce teaching at 16:18, a bare halakhic ruling — no Pharisees, no house, no Genesis, no one flesh, no "what God has joined."[21] Two members of one severed block, each preserved as a token and stripped of its covenant. Whatever Luke's motive — and §8.2 argues it was irenic rather than hostile — his knife fell on the pair as a pair, which is easiest to explain if the pair was there to fall on. Matthew's handling points the same way from the opposite direction: he preserves the Markan sequence intact — his community discourse (Matt 18, reworking Mark 9:33–50) runs directly into the marriage pericope (19:1–12) with Gen 2:24 and the one-flesh teaching in place — while extracting the salt to his Sermon; and in that Sermon the two members of Mark's pair stand nearly adjacent once more, the relocated salt (5:13) a few lines from the short divorce ruling (5:31–32). The two evangelists who reworked Mark's arrangement each treated the salt and the marriage teaching as belonging to one operation. They read the joint this section reads.

What this section claims, then, and what it does not. It does not claim a syntactic bond between 9:50 and 10:1, and it does not claim that Mark cites Ezekiel 16 — the contact is a single verb and the thematic architecture it opens. It claims that the placement of the marriage teaching after the covenant-salt is design; that the design is legible in the one verb whose two scriptural homes are the two covenants; that the disclosed sense of the one-flesh teaching — union with Christ, a mystery — is attested in Mark's own milieu rather than supplied by this study; and that the two later evangelists' parallel handling of salt-and-marriage as a unit is the reception such a design would leave behind. The reading of 6.2 and 6.4 does not depend on this section; this section is what those readings, if right, would predict — that the covenant disclosed under the salt does not end at the salt, but opens, in the next teaching, into the marriage by which the covenant was always going to be figured, and toward the tomb where the stone of betrothal waits to be rolled away. The full weight of the Ezekiel connection is deferred to the conclusion, where it is offered as a conclusion rather than a premise.

7. The Sayings Source Answers Mark

If the reading argued here is right — if Mark's salt is the intricate, reserved thing this study has made it — then a familiar fact about the other gospels falls into a new order. The salt saying exists in two forms.

There is Mark's: the three salt-clauses, the covenant of Leviticus, the fire of Gehenna turned to sacrifice, the marked ἅλα at the close. And there is the other form, shorter and differently pointed, the form in which salt is the disciple's savor, to be kept or lost, with no covenant and no fire. The relation between the two is usually told one way: Mark, it is said, reworked a simpler traditional saying into his odd Levitical shape. This study reverses the account. The simpler form is not Mark's source but his antagonist's reply; it is Mark's salt, mutilated on purpose.

Where Mark writes that the salt may "become unsalty" (ἄναλον γένηται), the other form writes that it may "become foolish" — μωρανθῇ, from μωρός, the root of our *moron*. Both Matthew (5:13) and Luke (14:34–35) carry it against Mark — but on the model of these studies that agreement proves little by itself, since Luke knew Matthew. What settles it is the Evangelion, which attests the form for the proto-Lukan line, before canonical Luke's use of Matthew. The mocking salt stood in the tradition independently of Matthew.

Commentators have long found the word strange: salt does not become *foolish*, it becomes *tasteless*, and the standard explanation is that the saying stood first in Aramaic, where a single root — *tpal* — carries both senses at once, *to lose savor* and *to be foolish*, so that a translator might render the one by the other. That explanation is almost right, and it is right about the mechanism. But what it treats as an accident was an instrument. A writer with both tongues — and the sayings source, on the account given in the previous studies, was the work of just such a bilingual hand — could reach for *tpal* precisely because it says two things, and could mean both. The surface reads "if the salt becomes tasteless." The ear that hears the Aramaic beneath it hears "if the salt becomes foolish." And the salt in question is Mark's. It is a joke at Mark's expense, and a pointed one: that the elaborate salt of his gospel, his covenant and his sacrificial fire, is not profundity but a thing misheard, a saying its author garbled into nonsense. Mark, in a word, is told he has played the fool with what Jesus said. The charge is false, and on the reading offered here knowingly so — a deliberate construction reframed as an incompetent one, which is what polemicists do.

The reconstructions of the sayings source open the saying with Mark's own words. Καλὸν τὸἅλας, "salt is good," is the clause that stands at Mark 9:50, and it stands at the head of the source's version too. Matthew, who has rebuilt the saying's opening for his own ends ("you are the salt of the earth"), no longer carries it; Luke does. So the parasitism is not confined to a single pun: the mocking saying takes not only Mark's subject but Mark's own opening phrase.

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It is worth being exact about which part of this carries the weight. On its plain sense the saying is an unremarkable proverb about a substance: salt that has lost its savor is good for nothing, which is true, and which any hearer could take home without suspecting a target. That surface is real, and most of the saying's features are fully explained by it. Two features resist that explanation. The first is μωρανθῇ. A translator rendering a saying about salt writes *tasteless*; he has no reason to write *foolish* unless the second sense is wanted. The second is weaker, and it is not the mere fact of a shared phrase. A proverb might naturally open "salt is good," and one document borrowing a common clause from another proves little on its own. What the surface does not explain is the *use* the clause is put to: it stands at the head of a saying that then calls the salt foolish and casts it out. That is not a borrowed opening; it is a concession set up to be demolished — the target's own words granted, then turned against him. Shared wording alone would be inert. Shared wording in the shape of a refutation is not.

The disposal that follows escalates, and the escalation is deliberate. The salt is fit "neither for the soil nor for the manure pile"; it is thrown out. A modern reader hears the manure pile as simple abuse and misses the point of the sequence. In an agrarian economy the manure pile is not a place of contempt but the last useful destination — where everything with any remaining value ends up, to be returned eventually to the field. Salt that fails even that test has no use at any level of the hierarchy. And what is done with it, ἔξω βάλλουσιν, is the language of expulsion. Foolish, then useless, then cast out: three stages, in order, each lower than the last. Whatever the surface says about a substance, this is the shape of a verdict.

A saying that mocks Mark's salt as foolish must come after Mark's salt, for one cannot ridicule what does not yet exist. The derision presupposes its target. The simpler form is therefore not the primitive saying Mark elaborated but the later saying an opponent composed against Mark's elaboration — and its wit depends entirely on Mark's version being already in the field, already known, already elaborate enough to be worth puncturing.

A second consideration points the same way. Mark's salt is not a saying but a structure: three occurrences of the word, two interlocking metaphors from Leviticus, the covenant of salt and the salt that makes a sacrifice acceptable, the fire of judgment bound by γάρ to the fire of the altar, the whole mirroring Paul's logic at Romans 12:1. To suppose Mark built this out of the flat one-liner is to suppose he reverse-engineered an intricate scriptural architecture from a scrap. To suppose the reverse — that the one-liner is what remains when the architecture is pulled down — asks far less. The elaborate does not grow from the plain by accident; the plain is readily got from the elaborate by demolition.

Set in the sequence the previous studies trace, the saying takes its place in a controversy. Proto-Mark went out first, carrying the salt in its reserved form. The sayings source — composed, we suppose, within the Jerusalem circle, by a bilingual author holding both the sayings of Jesus and a grievance against the Pauline gospel — answered it, and its answer was this saying: Mark's own phrase conceded, his construction called foolish, and the remains declared unfit for the dung heap. From the source the mocking form passed downstream, into Matthew, who built it into his counter-gospel, and into the proto-Lukan line, where canonical Luke and the Evangelion attest it. Canonical Mark, meanwhile, carried the original salt forward unrepentant.

Two forms of one saying thus descend along the two branches of a single quarrel — the reserved salt down the Pauline line proto-Mark began, the mocking salt down the Jewish-Christian line the sayings source began. And μωρανθῇ is the moment, fossilized in a word, when the one line fired at the other.

8. The Synoptic Responses to Mark's Reserved Meaning

The mystery encoding of canonical Mark did not go unnoticed by the authors who engaged with it. Proto-Luke and Matthew represent two distinct responses — disassembly, reflecting some degree of discomfort and systematic hostile counter-argument — and their differences are themselves evidence that canonical Mark's mystery encoding was a real and consequential theological program.

8.1. Matthew: Systematic Hostile Counter-Argument

Matthew's response to Mark's reserved sayings is the most revealing of the two, because it is the most precise. It is not the behavior of an author who missed Mark's meaning, but of one who grasped it exactly and wrote against it — and what betrays the comprehension is the *uniformity* of the operation. Across the cluster of sayings this study has read, Matthew performs a single transformation, again and again and always in the same direction: he rotates each saying off its vertical, Christological axis — grace descending from God to the hearer — onto a horizontal, communal one, where the saying becomes a rule for how disciples are to behave toward one another and what they must achieve. The reserved soteriology is lifted out; an ethic of works is set in its place. That he should perform the same surgery on saying after saying is what marks it as deliberate rather than incidental.

The lamp and the salt show the operation in its clearest form, for here Matthew makes the same move twice with the same words. Mark's lamp *comes* — a personified light whose arrival, this study has argued, is the coming of Christ; Mark's salt is the thing of Jesus's that the initiate is to have within him. Matthew

takes each and turns it into a predication about the disciples: ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου, "you are the light of the world," and ὑμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς, "you are the salt of the earth." The referent shifts from Christ to the community; the mood shifts from disclosure about Jesus to exhortation of the hearers; and to the lamp Matthew appends the purpose clause that fixes the new sense beyond mistaking — "so that they may see your good works." The personified coming-lamp and the reserved salt-of-Christ become, by one identical stroke applied to both, emblems of the congregation's moral visibility. The ἐν τίνι construction on which the salt mystery turned — the reserve's "in whom" — is removed entirely; there is nothing left for an interpreter to supply.

The measure undergoes the same axis-rotation. In Mark it governs the *reception of the mystery* — the disclosure given without stint to those who bring receptivity and withdrawn from those who do not, a transaction between God and the hearer. Matthew lifts it out of that setting and sets it down in the Sermon amid teaching on judging others (Matt 7:1–2), where "with the measure you measure it will be measured to you" becomes a rule of social reciprocity: judge gently and be judged gently. The vertical economy of revelation becomes a horizontal ethic of fair dealing — the same transformation worked on the lamp and the salt, applied now to a third saying.

One saying in Mark's discourse Matthew treats more aggressively still: he removes the episode, but he does not let its saying go. The validation of the unnamed exorcist who casts out demons in Jesus's name without following the apostolic circle (Mark 9:38–40) — "whoever is not against us is for us" — has no parallel in Matthew's narrative. But the logion at its heart survives in his gospel with its polarity reversed. Where Mark's saying protects the outsider — the man who works in the name yet does not follow the circle is *for* us — Matthew's reads "whoever is not with me is against me" (12:30), relocated to the Beelzebul controversy and turned to the opposite purpose: not a shelter for the unattached but a demand for alignment. The reversal is exact, and it runs in the direction Matthew's whole program runs. Mark's saying draws the boundary by attachment to Christ, and draws it wide enough to include the one outside the apostolic circle; Matthew redraws it as a boundary of allegiance, admitting no neutral ground. This is not rotation toward works but something sharper — the inversion of a saying's very sense — and it falls on a saying whose plain meaning was never about works at all but about authority: who may act in the name, and on whose sanction. A saying that authorized activity outside apostolic control could not be reoriented toward righteousness; its subject was the wrong axis. So Matthew did not reorient it. He turned it over. What Mark had made a door, Matthew made a wall.

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In place of the soteriology he has emptied, Matthew installs his own, and states its principle at the head of the Sermon: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). Where Mark located acceptance in participation in Christ — the salt that makes the offering acceptable regardless of moral attainment — Matthew sets a threshold of achieved righteousness. The whole Sermon then unfolds as the positive doctrine that fills the space the gutted sayings leave: not those who say κύριε κύριε but those who do the will of the Father (7:21); the house that stands is the one whose hearer *does* the words, not merely hears them (7:24–27). Matthew's Gehenna is populated by those who did not do enough; Mark's Gehenna is what the salt of Jesus carries one through, whatever one's moral performance.

That μωρός should surface again in Matthew, and repeatedly, is not incidental. The sayings source, as §7 argued, had already struck at Mark's salt with the bilingual pun that called it foolish — μωρανθῇ, the salt "become moronic." Matthew inherits the weapon and generalizes it into a structural motif: across his Sermon and his parables, foolishness is redefined as the failure to *do*. The man who hears the words and does not act on them is the μωρός who built on sand (7:26); the five μωραί virgins are shut out for want of oil they failed to provide (25:2–3). And Mark's salt, on the charge Matthew now carries forward, is foolish for the same reason: it rests on participation rather than performance. The jibe the sayings source aimed at the salt in a single word, Matthew expands into a standing verdict on any salvation grounded in faith rather than works — not only answering Mark, but amplifying the answer the sayings source had begun.

The objection will be raised that none of this need be counter-argument at all — that Matthew simply held a different theology, drew on different sources, and composed his Sermon independently, so that the divergence from Mark is difference rather than rebuttal. But difference alone does not account for what is observed. It is not that Matthew's theology happens to differ from Mark's; it is that he takes Mark's particular sayings, from Mark's particular cluster, and subjects each to the same transformation on the same axis in the same direction, and inverts the one member whose axis the rotation could not turn. Independent composition does not produce a systematic, single-directional reworking of another text's specific material. What the pattern shows is comprehension and intent: these are incompatible soteriologies, and Matthew knew it.

8.2. What Luke Did with the Salt

Let us look first at what (proto)-Luke did, before we attempt to explain his actions. The measure and the lamp sayings he does not significantly disturb; but the salt he treated differently. From the sayings source

he had the mocking form — Mark's opening "salt is good" conceded and then demolished, the salt called foolish and cast out (§7). This he placed among his other sayings material, and with his Markan material he left no salt at all where Mark had built it. The setting he emptied he did not leave otherwise intact: as §6.5 has set out, his travel narrative is driven through the block in which the salt had stood, severing Mark 9:41–10:12 — the covenant-salt and the covenant-marriage together — from its Markan place, and the marriage teaching reappears inside the wedge as stripped as the salt does, a bare ruling at 16:18 with no Genesis, no one flesh, and nothing that God has joined.

This is puzzling behavior, and it grows more puzzling the harder one presses it. Luke is elsewhere highly faithful to Mark's order and to his wording; why should this one stretch of Mark be treated so, and treated so thoroughly — the block severed, both its members carried off, and each stripped of the covenant it carried? If he did not perceive what Mark was doing, the operation is a remarkable coincidence: the wedge falls precisely on the block, takes both its covenant-carriers, and denatures each in the same way. But if he perceived it and was hostile to it, why keep the material at all? Why retain the divorce teaching, in any form, once its covenant has been cut away? Luke keeps everything, and keeps it broken.

Consider what we can reasonably infer about Luke. His soteriology is neither Mark's nor Matthew's. Where Mark reserved meaning is a justification by participation in Christ's sacrifice, and Matthew presses a righteousness of Torah and works, Luke preaches something that stands apart from both: repentance and the forgiveness of sins, salvation arriving *today* for the poor, the sinner, the outsider, the nations. His watchword is "repentance for the forgiveness of sins, preached in his name to all the nations" (24:47); his salvation comes to a tax-collector's house in an afternoon (19:9) and to a dying criminal with a word (23:43). It is a gospel of mercy and inclusion rather than of mechanism — less concerned with *how* the atonement works than with *who* is welcomed, and on what terms of turning and being received. The tax-collector who beats his breast goes home justified over the Pharisee (18:14); the prodigal is embraced before he can finish his confession. This is grace, but grace as *pardon*, not grace as the believer's incorporation into a sacrificial death. Luke's gospel does not carry Mark's sacrificial soteriology, whether reserved or open: the salt apparatus is dismantled, and Mark's plainer ransom-saying, "to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45), is absent from Luke altogether.

We take proto-Luke and canonical Luke-Acts to be the work of one author, writing decades apart; nothing in the vocabulary has been found to distinguish them. And the author of Acts is irenic — his governing aim is unity. Consider, in that light, the larger thing proto-Luke is doing. A war of words was raging between the Pauline faction and the Jewish-Christian faction at Jerusalem, and proto-Luke takes the

primary document of each side and stitches them together — the first to do so. He is aiming, it appears, at a middle ground; and his soteriology may be read in the same light, as a compromise between the two.

Seen this way, his handling begins to make sense. Luke is trying to be as fair as he can to both sides, and to give offense to neither. He cannot leave Mark′s salt apparatus intact — that would never satisfy the Jewish-Christian side of the debate. But he wants to preserve as much of Mark′s text, in some form, as he can, so as not to affront the Pauline side. The broken salt is the natural outcome of those two pressures at once: a saying that mocks Mark, preserved rather than suppressed, and set among Luke′s own material where it offends no one by standing alone. The unifier kept his opponents′ jibe in the book, and simply took it off its target. This is, we believe, the more parsimonious account of his behavior on our source model.

The trajectories of response may be summarized:

The sayings source — full awareness, open hostility: crafts the "moronic" rejoinder that mocks Mark′s salt directly.

Proto-Luke / Luke — full awareness, but irenic rather than hostile: dismantles Mark′s salt saying while preserving almost all of Mark′s text in some form, harmonizing the traditions rather than attacking one — the unifier′s hand.

Matthew — full awareness, systematic hostility: a sustained counter-argument running across the whole sequence of Mark 9:38–50 and 4:21–25, with the Sermon on the Mount as an alternative soteriology set against Mark′s.

The spectrum of these responses is itself evidence that canonical Mark′s mystery encoding was a real and consequential theological program rather than a modern scholarly inference.

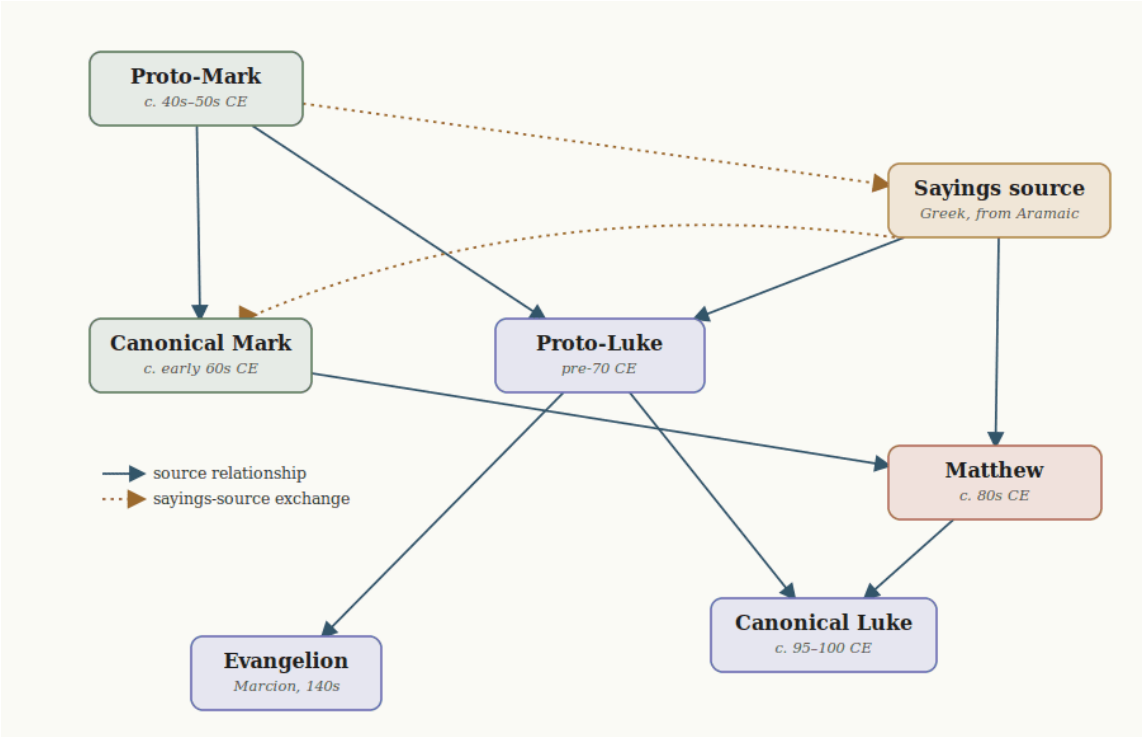
9. Canonical Mark Shows Awareness of the Sayings Source

The relationship between Mark and the sayings tradition has been argued before, though under different assumptions. Fleddermann[15], working within the Two-Source framework — Q an independent document, Luke unaware of Matthew — concludes that Q is consistently prior to Mark. The present model does not share those premises: it takes Luke to have known Matthew. That difference in premises substantially affects the results. Many cases of Mark/Sayings Source overlap we attribute to Luke’s knowledge of Matthew. The exact content of the sayings source, however, is not our focus here. Suffice it to say that on the layered account offered here, priority is not fixed in one direction: proto-Mark came

first and the source answered it, while the later expansion of Mark drew in turn upon the source, now grown and circulating.

The salt saying, argued above, shows the exchange running one way — the sayings source answering proto-Mark. It also runs the other way: canonical Mark, in the expansion, drawing on the source. The previous study details one such case, the greatest commandment[2] (12:28–34), and three more can be added to it. "What defiles a person" was examined there as expansion material (§4.7.1). Two others come from that study's §6, both bound up with the fig tree, identified there as expansion: the faith to move a mountain (11:23), and the cursing of the fig tree itself. The second of these is uncertain — Luke's fig tree, given a reprieve (13:6–9), differs so greatly from Mark's cursed one that the two may well be unrelated; but if they are related, it and the faith to move a mountain follow the same trajectory through the Synoptics as the other items here. All four are attested in Marcion[16]. Finally, the mustard seed (4:30–32) is treated in the next section.

Two consequences follow. The first is chronological: the sayings source stands between proto-Mark and canonical Mark in time, so that it can answer the earlier and feed the later without difficulty. The second is for the documentary model. The relationship between Mark and the sayings source is not a line but an exchange: proto-Mark provokes the source, and the source is drawn upon by Mark's expansion in turn. The diagram of the model records this with two further connections, the dotted lines marking where influence passed between Mark and the sayings tradition in each direction.



9.1. The Mustard Seed

A further instance of canonical Mark answering the sayings source is the mustard seed (4:30–32), and it is instructive because it comes bundled with material of Mark's own. The parable is double-tradition: it stands in Matthew (13:31–32) and in Luke (13:18–19), and it is attested in Marcion's Evangelion[16]. Its presence there places it in proto-Luke and so before canonical Luke's use of Matthew — which is to say it reached Luke from the sayings source, not from Mark. Luke confirms this by its placement: he carries the mustard seed not in a parable discourse answering Mark's but far off in the travel narrative, in a location owing nothing to Mark's arrangement.

This is the pericope's one point of friction with the criteria, used in the previous study, that identify borrowed material, and the friction is only apparent. Luke and Mark do show contact in the mustard seed — both lead into the parable with a double question where Matthew has none — but the contact is agreement through their shared source, whose two-question form Matthew alone smoothed away, not Luke's copying of Mark. Both drew the parable from the sayings source; naturally their versions resemble one another, as two copies of one original will. Luke has the seed and the great tree with the birds, Mark has the seed and a great shrub with the birds, and Matthew conflates both, arriving at a shrub/tree. What Luke does not reflect is the frame canonical Mark built around the mustard seed.

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For he did build a frame. Beside the borrowed mustard seed he set a parable of his own, the seed that grows secretly (4:26–29) — sown, sprouting the sower knows not how, coming to harvest of itself while he sleeps. The two are paired deliberately: a seed whose growth is hidden set next to a seed whose greatness is hidden in its smallness, the pair making a single point about a kingdom that works unseen until its disclosure. He follows the mustard seed with the other half of his frame, “Using many parables like this he spoke the word to them, so far as they were capable of understanding it. He did not speak to them except in parables...” (4:33-34a). That theme — hiddenness resolved in an appointed disclosure — is the reserve this study has traced throughout, here cast in parable. The mustard seed is the source's; the secret-growing seed and the pairing are Mark's; and the arrangement turns a borrowed saying to the expansion's own ends, exactly as the greatest commandment and the saying on defilement were turned[2].

Together the seeds of this section fit another of our criteria from the previous paper: they form a contiguous block of a kind the previous paper's criteria would recognize. Also, there are definitely seams in this area of Mark, but they support a separate sort of insertion, which we turn to next.

9.2. A Redactor's Frame in the Parable Chapter

The parable chapter shows two hands at work above proto-Mark. The first hand is the expansion's; the second is later, and it works against the grain of everything else the gospel does with its secret.

Begin with the frame. At 4:1 Jesus gets into a boat on the sea and teaches the crowd from it, the whole crowd on the land. At 4:35–36, "on that day, when evening had come," he is still in that boat: "leaving the crowd, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat." The phrase "just as he was" (ὡς ἦν) is decisive — it presupposes that he has been in the boat continuously, never disembarking. The boat scene, in short, runs unbroken from 4:1 to 4:36: one setting, one crowd, one continuous occasion.

Into the middle of that continuous scene, however, two brief notes drop Jesus into private company off the boat. At 4:10: "when he was alone...with the twelve.” And at 4:34b, closing the discourse: "...but privately to his own disciples he explained everything." Between these two notes the crowd and the boat vanish; after the second, at 4:36, they reappear, and Jesus is taken across "just as he was" — as though he had never left the vessel he is logically still sitting in. The seam is not subtle once seen: the private-teaching notes require Jesus off the boat and alone, while the frame around them requires him on it and before the crowd. The two cannot both describe one occasion. The private notes have been dropped into a scene that did not have room for them.

That the two notes are a matched pair matters. The one at 4:10 opens the private teaching; the one at 4:34b closes it. They are the brackets of a single editorial act — the opening and the shutting of a door that the surrounding boat scene leaves no room to open at all. If the opening bracket is intrusive on structural grounds, as the boat frame shows it to be, the closing bracket is most economically assigned to the same hand: one insertion, marked at both ends, enclosing the private exposition to the Twelve.

What the two notes accomplish is a specific thing, and it runs contrary to the gospel's characteristic practice. Everywhere else this study has looked, Mark's reserve withholds its disclosed sense from the inner circle: the dull disciples who do not understand, the places at the right and the left denied to the sons of Zebedee, the resurrection news that never reaches Peter (§10). The secret is disclosed past the Twelve, not to them. The two notes at 4:10 and 4:34b do the reverse — not by creating the secret, which is Mark's own, but by fixing its recipients. Mark's text divides insider from outsider and reserves the mystery for an undefined "you"; the inserted phrases resolve that "you" into the apostolic circle. "When he was alone… together with the Twelve" (4:10) makes them the ones to whom the parables are explained, and "privately to his own disciples he explained everything" (4:34b) shuts the door behind them. Here the Twelve are the ones let in and the crowd shut out — the exact inversion of the pattern the rest of the gospel sustains.

Two conclusions follow, and they support rather than strain the reading offered here. The first is that these notes are unlikely to be the expansion's own work; they belong to a later hand, one concerned to reclaim the gospel's secret for the apostolic circle that the reserved gospel had pointedly bypassed. The boat seam identifies the insertion on structural grounds; its content identifies the interest behind it — a re-privileging of the Twelve against a gospel that had written them out of the disclosure. The second is that the famous verses most often cited as the charter of Markan esotericism[6] — "to you has been given the mystery" — may not carry the meaning most readers give it: not Mark's secret entrusted to the Twelve, but Mark's open "you" resolved toward them by a later frame. The gospel's reserve was not a secret entrusted to the Twelve; it was a secret kept from them, disclosed to the prepared hearer over their heads. A subsequent hand, uneasy with a gospel that excluded the pillars, framed the parable discourse so as to make the pillars its recipients. That later frame is what most readers have taken for Mark's doctrine of the secret.

So the parable chapter is doubly worked: proto-Mark beneath, the expansion's secret-growth material set into it, and a later redactor's privacy frame enclosing the whole and turning its secret toward the Twelve.

The frame argued above is not the only instance of its gesture. Twice more in this gospel the same figure appears: a saying is delivered openly, then the disciples withdraw, and inside the house, when they ask, an explanation is given privately that is narrower than the saying it explains. At 10:10–12 the covenant teaching on the one flesh, argued above and below (§6.5, §10) to carry an important part of Mark's reserved meaning, is followed indoors by the ruling on remarriage and adultery.

And at 7:14–23 the crowd is called to with the hearing-formula, "hear me, all of you, and understand," regarding the saying that nothing entering from outside can defile a person. There follows, in the house, an explanation that reduces the saying to a teaching about foods. Three things suggest the aside narrows the saying. The formula elsewhere in Mark marks a saying that carries more than its surface. The saying itself names neither food nor mouth; the words "goes into the mouth" are Matthew's addition (15:11), not Mark's. And the participle appended at 7:19, καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα, "cleansing all foods," agrees grammatically with nothing in its sentence and is widely read as a later editorial insertion. The passage has the same shape as the last: a summons to hear, then an aside that explains something smaller than what was said.

What the defilement saying reserved, we do not claim to know. Several construals are available to a reader of this study: that what enters from outside is what God places within, the covenant working inward; or the cup of the covenant itself; or the Holy Spirit. This last is the strongest of the four, and for a reason the others cannot match: it is the only one with a mark behind it. At 1:10 the Spirit descends εἰς αὐτόν — into him, where the other evangelists write ἐπί, upon — a marked preposition of the kind that anchors the salt. And it alone supplies a reserved sense for what *comes out* of a person as well as what goes in: an unclean spirit[22]. The mark, however, sits at the baptism, not on the defilement saying itself; the saying proper carries no marked word, no scriptural address of the sort that anchored the ἅλα, and where the saying itself is unmarked this study makes no assignment. What can be said is formal, and it is enough: the flag of reserve stands over the saying, and the explanation given in the house does not discharge it. Whether all three asides are one hand — the frame-writer of this chapter tidying elsewhere what he tidied here — or the gesture of more hands than one, the figure itself is now attested three times: once to re-include the disciples in the secret, and twice where the private explanation is the surface's friend and the reserve's abridgment.

10. The Silence at the Tomb

Mark ends where no gospel should. The women come to the tomb, find the stone rolled away and a young man who tells them Jesus is risen and gone before them to Galilee; and then they flee and say nothing to anyone, "for they were afraid" (16:8). There the gospel stops. The abruptness has troubled readers since antiquity — two later endings were supplied to repair it — and it is read here as the last and boldest instance of Mark's reserved method: a surface that discloses nothing and a depth that discloses everything, delivered not on the page but in the interpretation. Two things stand beneath the silence, and they are the gospel's final two points: that the news does not reach the apostolic circle, and that a marriage has been accomplished.

The first is plain once looked for. The young man commissions the women to carry the news "to his disciples and to Peter" (16:7) — Peter named, singled out. And then, in the narrative Mark actually gives us, the message is not shown being delivered: the women flee and say nothing to anyone. Whatever Mark assumed his readers knew of what followed, the text he wrote closes before the news reaches the apostolic circle, and closes with Peter, named a verse earlier, not yet told. One need not read this as a polemical withholding[23] to notice that it rhymes with a pattern already traced: as the places at the right and the left, sought by the inner circle, went at the cross to two condemned outsiders, so here the resurrection is disclosed to the gospel's audience while the narrative leaves the disciples, and Peter at their head, on the far side of the telling. The gospel that everywhere shows the inner circle failing to grasp what outsiders receive ends on the same note — the surface closing before its own good news arrives at the door of those who followed Jesus closest.

And the deeper thing is a marriage. The clue is in the stone, and above all in the women's question about it: τίς ἀποκυλίσει ἡμῖν τὸν λίθον, "who will roll away for us the stone?" (16:3).[24] The verb is ἀποκυλίω. The compound occurs four times in the whole Septuagint: three in the account of Jacob at the well (Gen 29:3, 8, 10), where the stone is rolled from the well's mouth, and once in Judith, of the body of Holofernes rolled from his bed (Jdt 13:9).[25] Of a stone rolled away, the Greek scriptures know only the betrothal-well of Genesis 29. The verb even discriminates between the two things a stone could do at Mark's tomb. When the scriptures roll stones to *seal* a mouth in the earth — over the cave at Makkedah, shutting men in and later closing it over their bodies (Josh 10:18, 27) — they drop the ἀπο-. The away-rolling compound belongs to the well of the betrothal; the sealing of a grave-mouth over the dead takes other forms. Mark's tomb is given the well's verb, not the grave's.

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One element of the type-scene Mark conspicuously lacks: there is no well — though the well and the tomb are alike in the one respect that matters, each a mouth in the earth sealed by a stone; Genesis says it three times over, the stone ἐπὶ τῷ στόματι τοῦ φρέατος, "on the mouth of the well" (29:2, 3, 8). The well's absence is the point. Mark has taken the betrothal-scene's stone and set it at the mouth of a tomb, the place of new life and marriage exchanged, on the surface, for the place of death. The well is precisely what the surface withholds — the reserved term, carried into the tomb by the marked verb, and given back, like the covenant under the salt, in the interpretation. This is the reserved method working at the ending exactly as it works at the salt: the surface shows a tomb and some frightened women, while beneath it, signaled by a marked word, stands a betrothal.

That scene is the best-known instance of a fixed biblical form, the betrothal type-scene: a man comes to a foreign land, meets a woman at a well where a stone must be moved, and is joined to her in marriage[17] [18]. It is the scene of Jacob and Rachel, as its kin are the scenes of Isaac and Rebekah and of Moses and Zipporah. Once the verb has pointed to it, the rest of the scene's markers stand out at Mark's tomb. There are the women, approaching. There is the question of who will move the stone, which is Genesis's question too, posed there as an inability — "we cannot, until all the shepherds are gathered and they roll away the stone" (29:8) — and here as the women's τίς. And there is the stone's size: both texts pause to call it great, Genesis λίθος… μέγας (29:2), Mark μέγας σφόδρα (16:4).

And the well of Genesis 29 is a place of sheep. Three flocks lie beside it, waiting for the stone to be moved (29:2); Rachel's own name means "ewe," a sense the Hebrew carries though the Greek Ραχηλ loses it; and Jacob's first act once the stone is rolled away is to water her father's sheep (29:10). The type-scene Mark has reached for is not merely a betrothal but a betrothal among flocks, at a stone that stands between the shepherd and the sheep.

Mark has prepared for this. At the tomb the young man's message — "he is going before you into Galilee," προάγει ὑμᾶς (16:7) — echoes the promise of 14:28, the same verb and the same ὑμᾶς, which Mark had there tied to the struck-shepherd oracle of Zechariah: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Zech 13:7, cited at 14:27). The shepherd struck, the flock scattered, and now the risen shepherd going on ahead of the regathered sheep. So the two figures meet in a single image at the empty tomb. At the well, the stone is rolled away and the shepherd waters the flock; at the tomb, the stone is rolled away and the flock is called to follow the shepherd. The betrothal type-scene and the shepherd oracle converge on one picture — the shepherd-bridegroom, the flock-bride, and the stone no longer standing between them[26].

Read so, the stone rolled from the tomb is the stone rolled from the well: the barrier removed between the bridegroom and his bride. That Jesus is the bridegroom is not imported; Mark has said so. Early in the gospel he calls himself the bridegroom who will be "taken away" from the wedding guests (2:19–20), his death already figured as the bridegroom's removal. And in the teaching set directly after the covenant-salt (§6.5), he teaches from Genesis that "the two shall become one flesh," and "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (10:6–9).

A third moment joins these two. At the supper, immediately after the cup has passed, Jesus swears abstinence: "I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (14:25). The vow has long puzzled readers as a solemn renunciation with no evident occasion. The betrothal customs of the period supply one. Jewish marriage of the era fell in two stages, betrothal and wedding, separated by an interval in which the bridegroom was absent, preparing a place for the bride; a shared cup marked the betrothal, and the marriage feast came only later[19][20]. Against that frame the supper reads as a betrothal rite performed: the cup is shared, the abstinence is sworn, and the feast is deferred to the day the bridegroom returns — "when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." It is the same structure as 2:19–20, where the bridegroom is taken away and his absence is what the wedding guests fast through. The cup binds the betrothal; the vow marks the departure between the stages.

A gospel that names Jesus the bridegroom at its opening, teaches the one-flesh joining after the salt of the covenant, and enacts the betrothal over the last cup, closes with the betrothal-stone rolled back at a tomb. The bridegroom, taken away in death, is united to his people; the tomb-opening is that union effected — the stone rolled from the mouth, the bridegroom joined to his people. What remains ahead is only the feast: the cup he swore to drink new, in the kingdom, with the bride already his.

The reading finds support on both sides of Mark. On one side stands the theology Mark is reserving, already current in his own circle: the one-flesh union of Christ and his people was the common coin of the Pauline mission with which proto-Mark stood in contact — the one-flesh text named a mystery of Christ and his people, the community betrothed to one husband (§6.5, on Eph 5:31–32; 2 Cor 11:2; 1 Cor 6:16–17). What Mark reserves at the tomb, his contemporaries already believed. On the other side stand the later readers who drew the reserved sense into the open. The Fourth Gospel set Jesus at Jacob's well itself and evoked the betrothal scene deliberately. What Mark reserves at his tomb, John makes plain. And the tomb read as the ruined Temple — the Isaian thread Hanhart pursued — points the same way: the old cultic order ended, and a new covenant opened in its place.

We now pause to ask, “What are the odds?” Jacob at the well is both bridegroom and shepherd. Mark gives us the bridegroom theme at 2:19–20, at 10:6–9, and at 14:25. The shepherd he gives us at 6:34 (like sheep without a shepherd) and at 14:27. Mark gives us the verb linked to the well and the circumstances of women approaching and wondering how the stone will be moved. All of this is coincidence if Mark does not intend for this scene to evoke the well.

If this is not coincidence, we must ask what Mark meant us to understand by it, and the answer requires being explicit about the character of the scene he evokes. The well of the betrothal type-scene is not a neutral meeting-place. In its modern students′ reading it trades throughout on the well as a figure of the woman and of fertility, the opened well a charged and sexual thing[17]. Mark is not squeamish about sending us there. One of the chapters his salt-verb cites, Ezekiel 16, is among the most frankly sexual passages in the scriptures (16:25-34). A gospel that has already reached for Ezekiel 16 has reached for that register.

Read so, the stone at the well′s mouth is what closes the bride, and the rolling-away is her opening. In the Genesis scene the sense runs beneath the surface exactly as Mark′s does: on the face of it Jacob waters his kinsman′s literal flocks, but the scene is also a union, the woman is named Ewe, and Jacob rolls away the stone, waters the “sheep,” and kisses her (29:10-11). The surface waters sheep; the depth “waters” the bride.

So while no wedding is celebrated at Mark′s tomb, a union is signaled there, and it is the union that matters, for it is where life is given. What passes to the bride is what Mark has reserved throughout: the Spirit, the eternal life-giving essence of God, given now to the flock-bride at the opening. Mark does not equate the seed and the Spirit; he lets the one picture the other, the bodily giving of life standing for the divine[27].

And Mark has already shown, at the gospel′s other end, how that giving is done. At the Jordan the Spirit descends into Jesus at his baptism — εἰς αὐτόν, into him (1:10) — the water and the Spirit together, the one the vehicle of the other. Baptism is where the Spirit is put into a person; Jesus′s own is the pattern, the believer′s the participation. The tomb-union is that same giving raised to its widest scope: the Spirit made available not to one man in a river but to the whole flock-bride at the opened tomb. What baptism effects in each, the union opens to all.

Nor is the figure smuggled in at the end. Mark planted it at its middle. In the parable of the seed growing secretly the sower scatters and then "knows not how" it sprouts and swells (4:26–29) — read here as the

Spirit's hidden work, life rising by a power beyond man. That is what the tomb enacts: life given to the bride and springing up by the same unseen power. The parable and the empty tomb are the one reserved thing said twice — a sowing, and life coming from it by no human means.

The two-stage shape of the thing, already glimpsed at the cup, finds its warrant in the Genesis scene itself, and in an order that is easy to miss: the union comes first, the wedding long after. Jacob meets Rachel at the well and is joined to her there in the scene's charged language, but the marriage is years away, deferred until the bride-price has been served. Sexual union early, wedding late, the two widely parted. Mark's timing keeps that order. The union is accomplished at the tomb; the wedding waits for the kingdom, when the bridegroom drinks the cup new. The bride is already his, as Rachel was Jacob's from the well; what remains is only the feast.

That deferral raises a question the gospel does not fully answer: when does Mark look for the bridegroom's return? Canonical Mark plainly expects an end-times coming, in the Danielic clouds of chapter 13 and at the trial. Whether proto-Mark did is less certain; the clouds are absent from its trial scene[21], which leaves the question open, though nothing in the tomb-union depends on how it is resolved.

Does Mark tell us that Jesus appeared to people shortly after his death? The gospel that ends with the empty tomb does not. He says that Jesus will go ahead of them to Galilee, but then this message is not passed on to Peter. Given that Mark withholds secrets from the twelve as a pattern, we might speculate that Mark means for there to be no post-resurrection appearances. But Mark does not say, so neither can we.

After his union with Rachel, Jacob had to wait 7 years and then 7 more for an actual marriage cup. It is reasonable to think then that Mark means the wedding feast of Jesus and the church to happen at the end-times, as other places in the NT do, and this is what Jesus's vow and the cup signal. But, perhaps uniquely in Mark, he intended us to understand that the joining happened first and happened at the tomb.

10.1. Ezekiel at the Tomb

The union at the tomb is not a new figure but the salt's covenant, followed to its end. The verb of the salting, ἁλίζω, has two homes in the Greek scriptures (§6.5). One is the covenant of sacrifice at Leviticus 2:13. The other is the covenant-marriage of the Lord and Jerusalem at Ezekiel 16, where the unsalted foundling is taken by covenant — "and you became mine" (16:8) — and taken by blood: the Lord passes

by the unsalted infant and says to her, "from your blood, life" (ἐκ τοῦ αἵματός σου ζωή, 16:6). Mark's covenant is sealed the same way, over the cup: "my blood of the covenant" (τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης, 14:24).

In Ezekiel the covenant is then broken (16:59), and then, in the chapter's last word, restored by the Lord's own act: "I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your infancy, and I will raise up for you an everlasting covenant... and you shall know that I am the Lord" (16:60, 62)[28]. A marriage-covenant broken by the bride and renewed by the bridegroom alone: that is the story Ezekiel tells, and it is the story Mark's ending enacts. The bridegroom is taken away, and the stone is rolled back from the mouth of the earth. The salt of Mark 9 asked in whom the failed covenant would be seasoned again; the tomb of Mark 16 is the answer performed.

A second figure carries the same chapter's vocabulary, and he appears twice. The verb περιβάλλω — to wrap about, to clothe — occurs in Mark exactly twice, and on both occasions in the same participial form and of the same figure: a νεανίσκος περιβεβλημένος. The first is the young man who follows at the arrest, wrapped in a linen cloth over his bare body, and who, seized, leaves the cloth in their hands and flees naked (14:51–52). The second is the young man at the tomb, seated on the right, wrapped in a white robe (περιβεβλημένον στολὴν λευκήν, 16:5). A unique figure-word and a unique clothing-verb, twice, and nowhere else in the gospel: the pair is welded at the level of the lexicon.

Set the pair against the chapter whose verb the salting already cites. Ezekiel 16 tells its covenant as a sequence of clothing. The foundling lies naked (16:7); the Lord covers her and enters the covenant with her (16:8); and he clothes her — καὶ περιέβαλόν σε, the same verb (16:10). At the breach the clothing is taken back, her lovers stripping her and leaving her naked again (16:39). And in the chapter's last word the covenant is raised up everlasting (16:60–62). Mark's two young men stand at that cycle's two poles, and in the cycle's own word: at the breach, a νεανίσκος περιβεβλημένος stripped to nakedness and fled; at the renewal, a νεανίσκος περιβεβλημένος, seated, in white.

That the two scenes mean dying and rising was argued by Scroggs and Groff[22], who read them as a baptismal figure — the initiate stripped, buried with him, and raised re-vested. The reading offered here does not displace theirs; it supplies its scriptural template. What they located in the baptismal practice of Mark's circle, Ezekiel had already written as the shape of a covenant: unclothed at the breach, clothed at the renewal. And the reason to prefer that chapter over the general stock of nakedness-and-glory imagery is not the fit alone but the company it keeps. The salting verb, ἁλίζω, singled out this chapter (§6.5). Having been pointed there, Mark's gospel keeps drawing from the same chapter — the blood covenant made with the infant (16:6), the marriage covenant made with the grown foundling (16:8), and

the clothing taken and restored (16:10, 39). The two-scene figure wears that chapter's wardrobe in the gospel whose salt cites that chapter.

The silent ending belongs to proto-Mark (§11), and it cannot be had without its announcer: the women flee and say nothing, and what they say nothing about is what the young man has just told them. Remove him and there is no message to withhold, and no ending to be silent at. The fleeing young man is the less certain of the two, standing as he does beside material the previous study assigns to the expansion, and he might on that account be thought to have come in with it. But he is welded to the tomb figure by a verb this gospel uses nowhere else, and by a noun it uses of no one else; and a figure so bound is bound to the layer his twin belongs to. The pairing is therefore not a consequence of the layer assignment but a reason for it. The salt and both young men sit together in proto-Mark: one layer, one chapter, one hand.

The later evangelists' handling is at least consistent with the figure having been read and disliked. Both remove the man. Matthew puts an angel at the tomb (28:2–5); Luke, two men in dazzling clothes (24:4) — and the doubling is characteristic of him, matching the two men of his transfiguration and the two of Acts 1:10, a writer exchanging a single anonymous human witness for something evidentially and celestially proper. Neither retains the fugitive of the arrest at all. On the model of Matthew and Luke as close readers of Mark that §§8.1–8.2 have applied to the salt and the lamp, this is the same documented behavior at a new site: they found a man where Mark had put a man, and would not have him there. No weight is placed on any reconstruction of their motive — embarrassment at an odd vignette accounts for the fugitive's disappearance as readily as recognition would, and the removals are offered as consistent with the reading, not as evidence for it. What the passage carries on its own is the lexical fact: the gospel's only two περιβεβλημένοι are one figure, naked at the breach and clothed at the renewal, in the wardrobe of the chapter his salt already cited.

11. The Character of Proto-Mark

This study and its predecessor have been occupied largely with the expansion — what canonical Mark added to the gospel it inherited. It is worth asking what the inherited gospel was like: not its seams and additions but the base into which they were worked. The method is subtraction. Having reconstructed the expansion on independent grounds, we set it aside and ask what remains; the remainder is proto-Mark.

Three things belonged to proto-Mark from the first. The first is its soteriology and Christology — the Pauline salvation and the figure of Jesus this study has traced through the salt and the light. These sit in

base material, and they are the theological center of the gospel at every layer; the reserved reading is not a late overlay but proto-Markan, the earliest gospel already speaking in two registers. The second is its openness to the nations: the Gerasene delivered in the Decapolis and sent to proclaim what had been done for him (5:1–20) stands in proto-Mark, and with it the outward turn the expansion would enlarge rather than invent.

The third is the esoteric method itself: a teaching that carries more than its surface and waits on an interpreter to disclose it. The sower already works this way — though there its decoding is given openly, to all who hear, not withheld for a private circle. What the base does not yet contain is the machinery of deliberate concealment: nowhere in proto-Mark does Jesus speak "only in parables," and nowhere are there outsiders meant not to understand.

A fourth thing may be said of the base negatively. The absolute ἐγώ εἰμι — the self-declaration that carries the divine name of Exodus and the ἐγώ εἰμι of Isaiah's God, the 'I am' by which the God of Israel names himself — is spoken by Jesus twice in Mark: on the water (6:50) and before the high priest (14:62). Both fall in material the previous studies assign to the expansion: the first inside the block Luke never received[2], the second in the night trial[21]. The third occurrence in the gospel is not his at all; proto-Mark knows the formula but places it only on the lips of impostors (13:6). Proto-Mark, then, nowhere has Jesus declare himself. The gospel that hid its soteriology in a covenant-word and its Christology in a lamp did not put the divine self-naming on its subject's lips; the expansion did, twice, and openly. What the base encoded, the enlargement states[29].

And the disciples of proto-Mark already fail. The threefold denial, the sleeping in Gethsemane, and the sharp rebuke at the first passion prediction — "Get behind me, Satan" (8:33) — all belong, on our reconstruction, to proto-Mark. Even the silent ending, the women fleeing the tomb and telling no one (16:8), is the base's (§10.1). The earliest gospel was already hard on the disciples, and hard on Peter in particular.

But it was hard on them as followers. In proto-Mark the disciples fail the way the heroes of Israel's scriptures fail — David, the patriarchs, the prophets — as chosen men who fall short of their calling. Yet they are not explicitly excluded from the mystery. We are not told Jesus speaks only in parables in proto-Mark (§9.1) and we do not see them failing to grasp what is shown to them as we do in canonical Mark (8:16-21). And the revelation to Peter along with the two-stage healing of the blind man shows Peter grasping at least half the truth. Their failures are the failures of those who belong: moral failures, failures of nerve and of comprehension, but not exclusion.

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What the expansion does is not to add failure — there was failure enough already — but to change what the failure means. Under the expansion the disciples' shortcoming is recategorized: no longer the stumbling of companions but exclusion from the secret itself. They do not understand about the loaves (8:21)[30]; "their hearts were hardened" (6:52)[31]. The dull disciples of canonical Mark do not merely fall short; they are on the wrong side of the reserve, the ones from whom the disclosed sense is withheld while it is given to others. Failure of nerve becomes failure of standing. The change is not of degree but of kind — a moral falling-short reread as an epistemic shutting-out. And it is joined to a second, institutional move: the cursing of the temple which set the cult the disciples' leaders represented on the far side of the same divide. The pillars and their institution are aligned, together, with what the gospel now supersedes. This is the anti-cultic and anti-Petrine edge that this study and its predecessor have traced — and it is the expansion's, laid upon a base whose disciples failed but were not yet shut out[32].

That reframing sets up the last movement, treated above in §9.2. If the expansion shut the Twelve out of the secret, a later redactor let them back in — framing the discourse so that the mystery is explained privately to the disciples after all, the door the expansion had closed reopened for the pillars. The sequence, then, runs in three stages. Proto-Mark: disciples who fail as followers do, within a gospel Pauline in its soteriology, open to the nations, and reserved in its method. The expansion: those same failures recategorized as exclusion, the secret withheld from the circle and the cult superseded along with it. And the redactor: the circle readmitted, the secret returned to the Twelve, the exclusion undone[33]. Failure, then exclusion, then restoration — the disciples' standing rewritten twice above a base that had only ever shown them stumbling.

12. What Are the Odds?

The readings offered in this study have been made one at a time, each defended on its own ground. It remains to ask what they amount to taken together — for an argument of this kind is not the sum of its parts but their product, and the question a reader is entitled to put is whether the whole accumulation can be coincidence.

Consider first what must be accidental if Mark is not the writer this study has described. It must be an accident that the one Old Testament text joining a lampstand to two anointed figures at right and left is the text his personified lamp, his refused right-and-left, and his crucified right-and-left compose between them, and the gospel must accidentally equate being prepared and being anointed.

It must be an accident that the one verb by which the Greek scriptures name a stone rolled away is the verb Mark chose for the stone at the tomb — the verb whose single such home is the betrothal-well of Genesis 29 — and that he set it at a tomb his gospel had already prepared to be read as a marriage, having named Jesus the bridegroom, made the one-flesh union his teaching, and sealed a betrothal over the cup. It must be an accident that the tomb keeps the well's own furniture: the women approaching, the great stone, the question of who will roll it away.

It must be an accident that the gospel's only two περιβεβλημένοι are one young man — naked at the breach, clothed at the renewal — and that these are the two poles of the covenant-cycle in Ezekiel 16, the one chapter outside Leviticus where Mark's salting verb is at home.

It must be an accident that the one occurrence of ἅλα in the entire New Testament falls on the single word on which the reserved sense turns: on the object of "have salt in yourselves," the accusative the Greek Torah keeps for the salt of the covenant. Matthew, Luke, and Mark's own neighboring clauses all write the ordinary ἅλας; only here, at the one word that carries the weight, does the marked form appear. And it must be an accident that the verb of the salting, ἁλισθήσεται, has a single home in the Greek scriptures — the covenant-of-salt command of Leviticus 2:13 — and that Mark, having taken the verb from that verse for 9:49, reaches into the same verse again for the marked accusative of 9:50. One verse supplies both. The verb has one further address in all of scripture, and what stands written there is kept for the conclusion.

It must be accident that the name of Jesus, joined to a person, rings three times in the lines before ἐν τίνι — and closes on "you are Christ's" — preparing the very 'in whom' the question withholds on its surface. It must be accident that Mark — who is everywhere economical, and who nowhere else strings sayings together on a shared word without a cumulative argument — gathered three salt sayings into one place here, of all places.[34] It must be accident that Luke's great disturbance falls on this sequence. And it must be accident that the saying-source author, a writer demonstrably at home in Aramaic — the son/pit/beast assonance proves his ear[1][23] — reached, of all the words available for salt gone wrong, for the one that means *foolish*, and that Matthew preserved the jibe and built it into the headline of his sermon.

No one of these, perhaps, would compel. But they are independent of one another: the lamp has nothing to do with the pun, the pun nothing to do with the placement of ἅλα, the placement nothing to do with where Luke's seam falls, or with the empty tomb. Independent improbabilities multiply. We do not pretend to put a number on the product — the priors are not ours to know, and an author with one esoteric habit is the likelier to have others, so the factors are not perfectly independent and a naive multiplication would overstate the case. The point is not arithmetical but qualitative: somewhere in this

accumulation the threshold is passed beyond which coincidence stops being the economical account, and design becomes the simpler hypothesis. We judge it long passed.

There is a second consideration, and it cuts deeper than the catalog of improbabilities. A gospel is, by the nature of the thing, a proclamation — of salvation, and of the resurrection that secures it. This was Paul's whole burden: Christ raised, and the believer saved in him. Yet Mark, alone of the four, proclaims neither openly. He has no resurrection appearance; his gospel ends with the women fleeing the empty tomb and saying nothing to anyone, the rising withheld in the very telling. And he has no plain soteriology — no Sermon, no discourse that sets out how a person is saved. Now it is barely conceivable that an author, particularly a companion of Paul, would compose a gospel — a *gospel* — with no message of salvation in it at all. Far likelier that the message is present and reserved, hidden as the resurrection is hidden, by a writer who withholds on the surface what he means to disclose beneath it. The absence of an open soteriology in Mark is not a hole in the gospel; it is the negative imprint of a soteriology kept back. And the theology that the reserved passages yield, when they are read, is Paul's — justification through participation in Christ, the boundary of clean and unclean abolished, the nations brought in — which is precisely the gospel one would expect a writer of Paul's circle to carry, and to carry in the reserved manner Paul himself used when he spoke his wisdom "in a mystery."

But the firmest ground is the third, and Mark himself laid it. We are not left to guess whether his audience could read his surface and find his meaning, because Mark shows us an audience trying and failing. After the second feeding — after the pair this study and our previous study have read as the gospel's most prominent reserved doublet — Jesus turns on the Twelve: "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?... When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets did you take up?... And the seven for the four thousand?" (8:17–21). The men who had been *present* at both feedings, who had handled the baskets, cannot read what the feedings mean. Mark stages their failure deliberately, and he stages it over the pair whose meaning our previous study[2] reconstructs — which is Mark's own testimony, from inside the text, that the feedings carry a sense that must be grasped and was not.

Draw the inference. If the disciples who saw the loaves broken could not read the feedings, what of Mark's own hearers, who did not see them but only heard them narrated — and who were, most of them, unlettered, unable to follow the chains of Isaiah and Leviticus on which the meaning hangs? They could no more decode the salt than the Twelve could decode the bread. Mark knew this. He cannot have expected the surface of his text to deliver its message to such an audience, because he has written into the

text itself the spectacle of a closer audience failing at exactly this task. And if the surface could not deliver the message, then the message was delivered another way — supplied, in the reading, by one who knew what the text reserved. That is the whole hypothesis of this study, and Mark has all but stated it for us: the meaning is there, and it does not come off the page by itself.

This is why the reconstruction offered in these pages is not, in the end, an imposition on Mark but a recovery of what he must have provided. He did not write his salt to be puzzled out by the clever; he wrote it to be *explained*, as the feedings had to be explained, as everything in this gospel that the disciples fail to grasp had to be explained. He stood behind his salt sayings and told his hearers what they meant — and the reading set out above is, as nearly as we can now recover it, the thing he told them. The marvel is not that the meaning was hidden. It is that Mark, writing for those who could not have found it, left in the text — in the marked word, the fourfold name, the lamp that comes, the bread the disciples could not read — every clue his interpreter would have needed to give it back to them.

13. Conclusion

This study set out to read canonical Mark as a reserved text — a gospel that says one thing on its surface and discloses another to those prepared to receive it — and to recover the Pauline soteriology it argues Mark placed there in the reserved meaning of the text. The reading is not offered as proof. It is offered as the most economical account of a gospel full of features that a plain reading leaves unexplained: a personified lamp that comes, and beside it a refused right-and-left and a crucified right-and-left that compose, between them, the one scriptural vision joining a lampstand to two flanking anointed ones — the anointing supplied by the gospel's own word for it, which names the woman's act at Bethany "preparing" the body it anoints; a salt that is good after hellfire; the marked form ἅλα set at the hinge where the salt proverb turns to address, and nowhere else; a threefold refrain of the name, sealed in 'you are Christ's,' that prepares the hidden 'in whom' the next question withholds; three salt-sayings gathered where Mark gathers nothing else; a rival salt mocked as *foolish* by a pun that must therefore come after the salt it ridicules; and an empty tomb whose stone is named by the one verb whose scriptural home, of a stone, is a betrothal at a well, and whose news is never told.

One thing remains to be said, and it is said last deliberately, because it is a conclusion and not another piece of evidence. The connection of Mark to Ezekiel 16 is, taken alone, a thread: one rare verb, ἁλίζω, whose only two homes in the Greek scriptures are the covenant-of-salt command Mark quotes at 9:49 and Ezekiel's allegory of the Lord's marriage. Standing by itself, that could be set aside. But the findings

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of this study were not assembled from Ezekiel; they were assembled from Mark, each on its own ground — the salt of the covenant at 9:49–50, the bridegroom of 2:19–20, the marriage that God joins at 10:6–9, the blood of the covenant at 14:24, the stone of betrothal rolled from the tomb at 16:1–8, the young man naked at the breach and then clothed at the renewal — and only then did a rare word among them, followed to its one other scriptural address, arrive at the chapter where that whole inventory was already written as a single story: the unsalted one, the blood in which there is life, the covenant-marriage, the naked breach, the clothed renewal, and the covenant raised up again, everlasting, by the Lord's act and not the bride's. If the study's readings are wrong, this is a coincidence with many parts: the accident must arrange not only the verb's two homes but the correspondence of one of them, item by item, to a program reconstructed from the other end. If the readings are right, there is no coincidence to explain: Mark built his gospel's two covenants on the one chapter of his scriptures that holds them together, and left the verb as the address. Ezekiel 16 is not further evidence for the reading offered here. It is what the reading, arrived at from Mark's side alone, turns out to have been describing all along — the parts cohering into a single, deliberate thing, because the thing was already written.

What that thing says is Paul's gospel. The salt at the center is justification by participation: the universal fire of judgment becomes, for those who carry the salt of Christ, the fire of an acceptable sacrifice, and the believer is saved not by works and not by Torah and not by standing in the apostolic circle, but by being in Him. The covenant under the salt, followed to Ezekiel, unfolds as adoption and as marriage — the two figures by which Paul himself names union with God: the believer taken as child and joined as bride. The lamp that comes is the light that is Christ, raised at last upon the lampstand of the cross. The measure is the economy of a disclosure apportioned by faith. The seed grows of itself, by a power not the sower's — grace and not achievement — and it grows because it has already been planted: the Spirit given now, at the opened tomb, and the harvest, the Kingdom, still to come. What is sown is what is already delivered; what it grows into is what is still awaited. And the gospel that holds all this withholds, on its surface, the very things a gospel exists to proclaim — an open soteriology, a risen Lord — because it was written to disclose them otherwise, in the reading, to those prepared to receive them. The dull disciples are Mark's own warning that his surface does not give up its sense: if the men who saw the loaves broken could not read the feedings, the unlettered hearer could not read the salt, and Mark knew it. He did not expect to be understood cold. He expected to be explained.

If the reading is right, it carries a consequence for the documentary history the earlier studies built. The synoptic gospels are not three independent deposits of tradition but moves in a single, sustained quarrel

over Mark's reserved gospel message. Proto-Mark went out first, carrying the reserved Pauline salt. The sayings source answered it — composed, we have argued, by a bilingual hand of the Jerusalem circle who reached for the one Aramaic word that would do double duty, so that the salt which "becomes foolish" is Mark's salt called moronic, a charge that Mark had misheard what Jesus said. Canonical Mark answered in turn, enlarging the gospel with an explicitly pro-Gentile expansion; Matthew answered again, dismantling the salt, the lamp, and the measure across his Sermon and setting a righteousness of works where Mark had set a mystery of grace. And proto-Luke/Luke, the most irenic, dissolved the quarrel by dissolving its object — keeping the hostile salt but lifting it clear of its target and breaking the Markan sequence apart. Each document answers the last.

A final word on the standing of all this. These three studies have proceeded from firmer ground to softer, and this one stands on the softest. The statistical model could be measured; the source-critical reconstruction could be disciplined by formal criteria; the present reading rests, in the end, on judgment — on whether the convergence of marked words, rare constructions, singular scriptural templates, and answering responses is better explained by design than by accident. We have argued that it is, and at points the argument can be pressed hard: the lamp's Pauline verb, the singular Zechariah template, the manuscripts that carry ἄλα, the telling word μωρανθῇ are not readings imposed but facts to be accounted for. But the frame that gathers them — that Mark wrote a mystery, and that its content is Paul's gospel — remains a hypothesis, offered to the field to be tested and, where it fails, corrected. What we claim is not that the case is closed but that it is real: that there is something here that asks to be explained, and that the explanation we have given accounts for more of it, more economically, than the alternatives. Mark told his readers that he hid in order to show. We have tried to take him at his word, and to show what he hid.

Notes

An older version of the salt portion of this study has lived on the author's website since about 2002. This is a much-improved version of that idea.

Statements and Declarations

Use of Generative AI

Claude (Fable 5) was used for copyediting, drafting, and condensing expository passages. All scholarly and interpretive judgments are the author's own. The author reviewed and verified all AI-assisted material and takes full responsibility for the content of the study.

Footnotes

[1] [8], p. 394

[2] A suggestive contrast: in Paul's use the commandment comes and brings death; here the Coming One comes and brings life.

[3] The Hebrew calls the two figures bənê hayyitshār, "sons of oil" — the oil of anointing — so that the angel's attendants are anointed ones standing by the Lord of all the earth. The Septuagint flattens this, rendering the phrase υἱοὶ τῆς πιότητος, "sons of fatness," and losing the anointing sense the Hebrew idiom carries. The point for the present reading is that the anointing is available in the Hebrew but not on the Greek surface: a reader of the Greek alone would not recover it. The connection therefore lies where the reserved method locates its disclosures — not in the surface text but with the instructed interpreter who knows the tradition behind it.

[4] The gospel of John may echo this self-motion: the wind/spirit (πνεῦμα) "blows where it wills (ὅπου θέλει), and you hear its sound but do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so is everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

[5] The secret seed is also treated in §9, where we argue it is part of canonical Mark's expansion (the subject of the prior study); there it does source-critical work, whereas here it contributes to understanding the reserve.

[6] "Every neuter word has the same form in the nominative and the accusative"[24]

[7] BDAG[8], 41, s.v. ἄλας. BDAG's derivation is an account of the form within the neuter paradigm, made without reference to the older masculine noun; it explains how a speaker *could* generate ἄλα by analogy, not that Mark did. The alternative parsing — accusative of ἅλς — requires no analogy at all[25][26][27].

Note that ἅλς is not foreign to the textual tradition of this very passage: the dative ἁλί stands in the witnesses that carry the gloss "and every sacrifice will be salted with salt" at 9:49, imported from Lev 2:13.

8[28] The distribution across the verse's three salt-nouns is instructive. B, D, and 28 read the regular nominative ἅλας at both preceding occurrences (καλὸν τὸ ἅλας; τὸἅλας ἄναλον γένηται) and ἅλα only at the climactic object; א and Ψ extend ἅλα one occurrence back (ἅλας, ἅλα, ἅλα); L, W, and Δ level it across all three (ἅλα, ἅλα, ἅλα). Since every listed witness carries ἅλα at the climactic word while only some extend it backward, the most economical account is that the form stood originally at the climactic occurrence and was progressively generalized to the preceding nominatives by assimilation — locating the marked form, in the earliest recoverable state of the text, precisely at the point where the saying turns from proverb to address.

9[28]: Mark, at 9:50. ἅλα is read at the climactic occurrence (the object of ἔχετε) by א, B, A, Ψ, D, L, W, Δ, 1, 28, and 565, and is printed there by Westcott–Hort[29] and the UBS/Metzger[30] text (and NA[31]) against the Byzantine majority and Textus Receptus (ἅλας). Notably, the first hands of both א and B read ἅλα at this word, each subsequently corrected to ἅλας (א*/א^{c}, B*/B^{c}) — the correctors performing in ink the same normalization toward the regular declension that the Byzantine tradition performs in transmission, and so confirming both the originality of ἅλα and its felt anomalousness to later readers.

10 The analogy is to a small class of neuters whose nominative and accusative end in -α while the stem is in -ατ-: γάλα, "milk," genitive γάλακτος; σῶμα, "body," genitive σώματος. The reasoning runs: τὸἅλας has the stem ἁλατ- (genitive ἅλατος), so a speaker with these paradigms in mind might back-form a nominative/accusative ἅλα. This explains how such a form could arise; it does not explain Mark's distribution of it, for a writer for whom the noun genuinely went on the γάλα model would have written ἅλα in the nominative as well, and Mark writes ἅλας there, twice.

11 The verb ἁλίζω, "to salt," occurs in the Septuagint only at Lev 2:13 (ἁλισθήσεται) and Ezek 16:4 (ἡλίσθης).[14] The second occurrence is treated in §10 and §6.5: it stands in Ezekiel's allegory of the covenant-marriage of YHWH and Jerusalem — the infant not salted at birth (16:4), taken in marriage by covenant (16:8), the covenant renewed after breach (16:60–62) — so that the verb's two scriptural homes are the sacrifice-covenant and the marriage-covenant, the two covenants Mark sets side by side in 9:49–50 and 10:1–12. In the New Testament the form ἁλισθήσεται appears only at Mark 9:49 and Matt 5:13; on the source model of this study (§7), Matthew's occurrence derives from the saying that answered Mark's.

[12] The preposition varies — ἐπὶ τῷὀνόματί μου at 9:37 and 9:39, ἐν at 9:38 and (in the idiom ἐν ὀνόματι ὅτι) 9:41 — and nothing here rests on the preposition. What recurs, and what a hearer's ear retains, is the pattern: the name of Jesus joined to a person, four times, capped by the belonging-formula of 9:41.

[13] The gloss πᾶσα θυσία ἁλὶἁλισθήσεται (or καὶ πᾶσα θυσία ἁλὶ ἁλισθήσεται) is carried, in varying forms, by the Byzantine tradition and others; its dative ἁλί is Lev 2:13's own. Whether read as an independent second clause or as a marginal cross-reference drawn into the text, its effect is the same: readers close to the language identified the verse behind Mark's verb and wrote it in.

[14] The double valence is the Torah's own. The same accusative ἅλα that Lev 2:13 sets in the covenant phrase, Deut 29:22 sets over the land in Sodom's figure — θεῖον καὶ ἅλα κατακεκαυμένον, "brimstone and salt burned" over the land under judgment — so that salt-with-fire as consecration and salt-with-fire as destruction stand together in the Greek Pentateuch before Mark holds them together in one clause.

[15] One further resonance is recorded without weight placed on it. Hebrew 'ālāh is the oath that seals a covenant — "the covenant and the 'ālāh," Deut 29:13 MT — and at Ezekiel 16:59, in the second Septuagintal home of Mark's salting verb (n. 11; the chapter is treated at §6.5), it stands at the breach: "who despised the 'ālāh in breaking the covenant" (MT; the Greek of the verse has no equivalent for the word, though the same translator renders it as "my oath" at 17:19). That a bilingual ear could hear the one word in the other is hardly in question — Mark's own transliterations show the two languages living in one writer, and the rival's μωρανθῇ shows the milieu punning bilingually on this very saying (§7). What cannot be shown is that the sound did any work: that Mark chose ἅλα for its Hebrew echo in addition to its Septuagintal home. The echo, if echo it is, need not even be Mark's: the covenant-phrase of his Bible already carried the sound, however it came to be there (on sound-led translation in the Septuagint, see [32][33]), and a bilingual reader of the verse inherited it with the citation. Nothing in this study rests on any of this; it is noted only that, for such a writer, the covenant's oath and the covenant's salt shared a sound — and that the sound came to him inside the verse he was citing.

[16] On the standard model, in which the Matt 5:13 / Luke 14:34 form is primitive, ἐν τίνι would reach Mark from the proverb tradition and the priming argument would reduce to placement. But §7 argues the priority runs the other way: the shorter form is a hostile reduction of Mark's, not its source. On that model Matt 5:13's ἐν τίνι ἁλισθήσεται is itself a splice of Mark's two clauses, the phrase of 9:50 joined to the verb of 9:49, which is what one expects if Mark's fuller sequence came first.

Separately, "in whom will it be seasoned" translates the verb; "covenant renewed" interprets the metaphor. ἀρτύω means to season, not to renew: the disclosed rendering keeps the verb — in whom will the salt be made salty again — and the renewal of the covenant is what re-seasoned salt is, on the Levitical sense of saltness established above, not what ἀρτύσετε says.

[17] See §6.4 n. 11. The Hebrew of Ezek 16:4 uses a different root for salting (המלח) than the noun of Lev 2:13's covenant phrase; the collocation ἁλὶ + ἁλίζω that binds the two verses is a fact of the Greek Bible specifically — which is where this study has argued Mark's salt lives (§6.2).

[18] The declaration of 16:6 carries a legal charge the English hides. "In your blood, live" reflects an adoption formula for foundlings attested in Mesopotamian law[34][35]: the newborn abandoned unwashed and unsalted is in the recognized state of exposure — the unperformed acts of 16:4, salting among them, are what a claiming parent performs, so the unsalted child is the unclaimed child — and the passer-by who declares "live" over her thereby takes her as his own, the blood naming the state in which the declaration finds her. Ezekiel's opening movement is thus an adoption before it is a betrothal: the Lord takes the unclaimed foundling first as daughter (16:6–7), then, grown, as bride by covenant (16:8) — which is also why one figure both finds and marries her. The chapter thereby holds, in sequence, the two figures by which the Pauline mission would speak of union with God — adoption (υἱοθεσία, Rom 8:15–17; Gal 4:4–7) and marriage (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:31–32) — both conferred on one who had no claim to either.

[19] The parallel is verbal, not cited: ἐγένου μοι is a genitive-of-belonging construction only in sense (dative of possession in form). What it shares with Χριστοῦἐστε (9:41) and with Paul's Χριστοῦ-formulas (1 Cor 3:23; Gal 3:29) is the covenant-logic: the covenant's effect is stated as belonging to a person.

[20] Whether Ephesians is by Paul or by his school does not affect the point, which is milieu rather than authorship: within the Pauline mission's literature, the one-flesh text of Gen 2:24 was read as the mystery of Christ and his people. The undisputed letters carry the same reading in 1 Cor 6:16–17 and the betrothal of 2 Cor 11:2.

[21] Luke 16:18 is attested for Marcion's Evangelion[16], which on the model of the previous studies places the short form in the proto-Lukan layer and so before canonical Luke's use of Matthew — the same layering argued for the salt of 14:34–35. Attestation in the Evangelion is stronger evidence than absence there, since Marcion worked by omission. The short form's kinship with Matt 5:32 would then run

through the sayings tradition, exactly as the μωρανθῇ salt does: the two members of Mark's severed pair descending the same rival line, side by side in Matthew's Sermon as they had stood side by side in Mark.

[22] See Bazzana[36] on Jesus understood as host to a possessing spirit, and as himself becoming one; and Wahlen[37] on the holy/unclean antithesis built into the vocabulary. These bear on the baptism, the temptation, the Beelzebul controversy, the unclean spirits, and the spirit's departure at the death. For possible Old Testament templates see Zechariah 12:10 and 13:2, Isaiah 63:10–11, and 1 Samuel 16:14, 23.

[23] See §11 below for how the polemical tone may have evolved.

[24] The argument is anchored at 16:3, where ἀποκυλίω is read without variation. At 16:4 the tradition divides: the first hands of א and B (with L) read ἀνακεκύλισται, "rolled back/up," printed by[29], against ἀποκεκύλισται in the mass of witnesses. Nothing here rests on 16:4: the women's question at 16:3 carries the compound undisputed, in the very slot Genesis gives it (the question of the rolling, 29:8), and the reception confirms which verb the tradition heard — Matthew writes ἀπεκύλισεν of the angel (28:2) and Luke ἀποκεκυλισμένον of the stone as found (24:2). If ἀνακεκύλισται is original at 16:4, Mark's report varies the compound his question introduced; the scriptural signature stands at 16:3 either way.

[25] The wider κυλίω family occurs elsewhere in the Septuagint[14]; the away-rolling compound does not.

[26] That the empty-tomb writers after Mark all reach for the same compound (Matt 28:2; Luke 24:2) marks it as his own, and shows how the tradition heard him. Hanhart[10] noted the link to Genesis 29, though to other ends than are drawn here.

[27] The seed-as-life metaphor appears in a number of contexts, though explicit warrant for equating the seed with the Spirit does not. The Fourth Gospel makes the comparison plainer, and appears to reach for the Song of Songs to do it: at Jacob's well Jesus offers "living water" that gives eternal life (John 4), the sealed fountain and well of living water of the Song (4:12, 15) now opened. In Luke, likewise, it is the Holy Spirit that "comes upon" Mary and causes her conception (1:35). Mark does none of this. He gives no living water, no nativity, and does not reach for the Song; his own signal that he intends an analogy and not an equation is in the parable itself, which he frames by asking what "the kingdom of God is like" (4:26, 30).

[28] One resonance in Ezekiel's wording is recorded here without weight placed on it: the covenant is renewed with the verb ἀνίστημι, "I will raise up" (ἀναστήσω σοι διαθήκην αἰώνιον, 16:60; ἀναστήσω τὴν διαθήκην μου, 16:62), the verb of Mark's own passion predictions (ἀναστῆναι, 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). ἀνίστημι is common

vocabulary and the coincidence proves nothing alone; within a convergence already established on ἁλίζω and the stone, the fact that Ezekiel 16 renews the marriage-covenant with Mark's own resurrection verb is worth noting.

[29] A parallel case may be made for the covenant declaration at 14:24, though it is offered as speculation and nothing here depends on it. On this suggestion proto-Mark carried the covenant only in reserve, in the salt, and the open declaration over the cup belongs with the expansion — the same movement from encoded to stated that the ἐγώ εἰμι shows. The supper tradition is textually unstable at just this point. Luke gives first a cup with the vow, "I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (22:17–18), and then, after the bread, a second cup with the full formula (22:20); the doubling has the look of a seam. And Codex Bezae, with several Old Latin witnesses, omits 22:19b–20 altogether, so that its supper has the cup and the vow, then the bread, and no covenant declaration at all — which is the shape proposed here for proto-Mark. Three cautions. Luke's covenant formula is not Mark's: "this cup is the new covenant in my blood" is Paul's wording at 1 Corinthians 11:25, not the Markan "my blood of the covenant," so the two are independent forms and Luke's is no witness to what stood in proto-Mark. The Pauline form is attested in Marcion, which places it in the proto-Lukan line and tells against Bezae's shorter text. And the modern critical editions print the longer text, treating the omission as secondary, though Westcott and Hort judged otherwise and classed it among the Western non-interpolations. The witnesses thus disagree, and the suggestion rests mostly on the analogy with ἐγώ εἰμι and on the seam visible in Luke even in the texts that carry both cups, rather than on the textual evidence, which points both ways. It is held loosely.

[30] See the previous paper in this series, §4.1.3.

[31] See the previous study, §4.3.2.

[32] While this is a thin thread to pull, we might speculate that the pillars made the first exclusionary move by saying Mark's salt should be "thrown out" as unfit for even the dung heap.

[33] The third hand is a significantly less secure claim than the expansion, which is the topic of the entire second study in this series.

[34] Catchword composition is the standard account of the sequence, and it describes the surface linkage truly: fire joins 9:48 to 9:49, salt joins 9:49 to 9:50. But it names the mechanism of the joining, not the point of the joined; and Mark's other sayings-chains (8:34–9:1; 11:22–25) cohere in sense as well as sound. This chain alone reads, on the surface, as sayings sharing a word and nothing more — and resolves into a

single argument exactly when the reserved sense is supplied (§6.4). A writer composing by catchword produces the linkage; only design produces the linkage and the withheld argument together.

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