

### **Significant Grammar in Mark 9:33-41**

Mark's grammatical choices in this passage are the next area needing scrutiny. Both his unique writing style and his use of certain "loaded" or significant grammatical constructions must be analyzed.

#### *Style*

Concerning his writing style, Mark used a conversational Greek, writing as if trying to capture the attention of his reader by means of rapid succession of events. This can be observed in chapter nine, verses 33-37, in the parataxis employed; four of the five sentences in this section begin with  $\kappa\alpha\iota$ , and three other clauses as well start with  $\kappa\alpha\iota$ . This has the effect of a brief story being told aloud.

Another observation about style is the use of direct discourse. The teaching by Jesus, John's question, and Jesus' response are told by means of direct quotation in verses 33, 35, 37, 38, and 39. This technique is somewhat unique to Mark and can bring the story to life for the reader by perhaps enabling him to "hear" the conversation taking place. However, as Wallace points out, an instance of indirect discourse occurs in verse 34. The subject of argument had been  $\tau\iota\ \mu\epsilon\iota\zeta\omega\nu$ , "who was greatest." The indirect discourse is here used for the purpose of taking a step back from the storytelling to explain what was going on; it is basically a parenthetical statement. Aspectually, an aorist is used instead of the expected imperfect (which would contribute to the parenthetical idea).

### *Aspect*

Aside from the above imperfect used for the purpose of explanation, Gundry points out that a conative imperfect may be present in verse 38. This would mean that instead of “we forbade him,” the passage could perhaps best be translated “we tried to prevent him.” He also points out the possibility of it being a linear imperfect, which is used in verbs of speaking.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspectual consideration is the historical present. There is one such verb in this passage, and it is quite significant in the flow of the narrative. Three times in verses 35-39, the English Bible reads “he said...” In the Greek, however, there is a variation in form; the first is a present, and the second two are aorists. Based on Porter’s theory of discourse analysis based on aspect, the aorist “tense” is roughly used as the backbone of the story, the narration of the main events. The present, however, is in the foreground, with the perfect in the frontground. Since there is no verb in the perfect in this pericope, the verbs in the present are of special emphasis.<sup>2</sup> This historical present is important because it marks the beginning of Jesus’ teaching in response to the disciples’ argument as to who was greatest. Porter comments that, especially in Mark, the historical present is used to mark a new pericope.<sup>3</sup> Gundry adds that such a form shows that there will be an emphasis on the following words.<sup>4</sup> This proves to be the case in Mark 9:35,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Mark, A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 511.

<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a significant verb in the perfect form in verse 42, which may suggest that it is an emphatic statement for the larger pericope; a unit including 9:33-42 of 9:33-50 may be more appropriate than 9:33-41.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994): 301-302.

<sup>4</sup> Gundry, *Mark*, 509.

where λέγει introduces Jesus' whole teaching opposing a search for greatness. Then, as Jesus continues his teaching, the less marked aorist forms are used: εἶπεν.

Finally, an “imperative future” is used in verse 35. Wallace describes such a future form as being universal, timeless, and/or solemn in force.<sup>5</sup> The phrase is ἐσται παντῶν ἐσκατοῦ καὶ παντῶν διακονοῦ. Wallace says this is a very emphatic form, uncommon in the New Testament outside of Matthew. In Matthew its common usage is largely due to literal translation of Old Testament passages, especially the Ten Commandments. The emphasis is due to the combination of the indicative and the future.<sup>6</sup> Thus the meaning is not simply “the one who desires to be first *will be* last,” as if a commonplace observation were being made. Rather, Jesus is saying this is the way it **MUST** be; “the one who desires to be first *must* be last of all and servant to all!” Jesus hated the comparing and yearning for greatness among his disciples, and he was calling them to a necessary change in attitude.

### ***ἐν ὀνόματι ὁτι (v41)***

While most translations render this “in my name because,” following one of two viable textual variants for this phrase. However, the Red Text follows a different variant which excludes the adjective μου. The NetBible also takes this into account and translates the phrase as simply “because,” with a note that the phrase could be literally be translated “...gives you a cup of water in the name that you are Christ’s.”<sup>7</sup> This latter reading is then put into better and simpler English, “because you are of Christ.”

### ***οὐκ ἔστιν + subjunctive***

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 569.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 452-453.

In Mark 9:41, this construction is used. Wallace calls it the “strongest way to negate something in Greek,” and he says it is primarily used in the sayings of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The reward gained by one who associates himself with a follower of Christ is emphatically said to be something which *cannot* be lost. This jumps out at the reader because of the seemingly trivial act described in the verse: giving a cup of water. Gundry points out that it the powerful nature of this promise (a reward that will *never* be lost for a small act showing association with a believer) is contrasted in the next verse with the powerful nature of the punishment to be inflicted on anyone who causes a believing child to stumble.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> NetBible, <<http://www.netbible.com/netbible/>>, Mark 9:41.

<sup>8</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 469.

<sup>9</sup> Gundry, *Mark*, 510-520. The latter is made more powerful by the use of a perfect form, the impossibility of fitting someone’s head through the center hole of an upper millstone, and the unheard-of nature of execution by drowning in Judaism, according to Gundry.

## Bibliography

NetBible <<http://www.netbible.com/netbible/>>, Mark 9:41

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