

Copper Coins, Catchwords, and Contextual Cues

The Climactic Placement of the Widow's Mites (Mark 12:41-44)

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Abstract

The story of the widow in the temple with her two small copper coins (Mark 12:41-44) is a familiar one, but recent scholarship has yielded a surprisingly divergent array of interpretative options. In particular, in noting the catchword *χίρα* (vv. 40,42,43) that links this episode to Jesus's diatribe against the scribes in the preceding pericope (vv. 38-40), recent scholarship has argued, against the traditionally positive interpretation of this narrative, that this context requires a negative or tragic interpretation. The present study argues that catchwords and other contextual clues link the widow narrative not just with the preceding pericope, but with the whole series of five disputations in the temple (vv. 13-40). With the episode functioning in this way as an epilogue to the whole section, the widow may be seen as both a model of discipleship as well as a tragic figure whose poverty illustrates the failure of the religious leadership. Because catchwords are frequently noted but rarely defined, criteria must first be proposed for their identification and verification. These are then applied to the passage in question to demonstrate the lexical and semantic links between it and the preceding passages. Seen in this context, the widow narrative emerges in both greater clarity and greater complexity, illustrating piety and true discipleship on the one hand, and the tragic failure of the temple cult and its leaders on the other.

1. Introduction

The story of the widow and her copper coins in the temple (Mark 12:41-44) has traditionally been understood to be self-evident in meaning: it is the size of the sacrifice, not the size of the gift, that truly matters to God. Yet recent scholarship has yielded a surprisingly divergent array of interpretative options on this well-known vignette. Is the woman a model of piety or the tragic victim of an oppressive and corrupt religio-political system? As with most matters of exegesis, the question revolves around context, with each interpreter appealing

to different details in support of a particular interpretation. This paper will argue in light of the various contextual cues discussed and, in particular, the often overlooked use of catchwords linking this pericope to the five preceding it, that the account of the widow is best understood as a climax or epilogue to the disputations between Jesus and the religious authorities (12:13-44). This placement within the narrative presents her as both a model of piety as well as a foil for the religious leaders and a victim of their hypocrisy. After briefly surveying common interpretations of this passage, I will outline my criteria for identifying catchwords and apply them to this passage. Finally, I will make concluding remarks on the interpretation of this passage within the context of all five disputations together.

2. Previous Interpretations

The most common line of interpretation for this episode, certainly in popular circles, but also in most modern commentaries until recently, is positive, a valuation of gift based on sacrifice rather than amount.¹ In contrast to the ‘many rich people’ who were ‘throwing in much’ (12:41; πολλοὶ πολούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλά), the poor widow ‘threw in’ more than all of them, for, rather than giving out of abundance, ‘she, out of her lack, threw in everything, as much as she had, which was her whole livelihood’ (v. 44; αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τῆς ὑστερήσεως αὐτῆς πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ἔβαλεν ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς).² This ‘sacrificial’ approach has the advantage of aligning most closely with what is explicitly said in the text, both by the narrator and in the words of Jesus.³ Furthermore, appeals are often made to similar accounts in Jewish, Greek, and other traditions which also

1. See, e.g. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 381–382; Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1991), 296; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 492–493. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 730, though he places the emphasis on ‘the power of Jesus to revolutionize the usual view of things’ including gifts, also generally favours this view. For a survey of this and other traditional options, see Addison G. Wright, ‘The Widow’s Mites: Praise or Lament? A Matter of Context’, *CBQ* 44 (1982): 256–265.

2. The magnitude of the amount in Jesus’s estimation is stressed through the pleonastic wording, esp. πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν ... ὅλον τὸν βίον αὐτῆς. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations reflect the author’s translation.

3. Even Wright, who finds the traditional interpretation ‘indefensible’, acknowledges that this contrast is explicit in the text (‘Widow’s Mite’, 258, cf. 265).

appear to make a similar point.⁴ At the same time, such positive approaches are often criticised for ignoring the immediate context.

A similar line of interpretation looks beyond the giving or sacrifice to a particular attitude Jesus commends, whether generosity, self-sacrifice, whole-hearted devotion, or faith.⁵ Although the narrative does not explicitly state the woman's attitude in giving, inferences may be drawn from appeals to other passages, including the whole-hearted devotion described in the discussion on the greatest commandment (12:28-34) or exemplified in the woman anointing Jesus (14:3-9).⁶ This also aligns with the attitude of total commitment demanded of Jesus's disciples (cf. 8:34; 10:28). Finally, apart from any implications that they may see for the concept of giving, some commentators make the connection between the widow and Jesus himself, who will also give up his whole life (cf. 10:45).⁷ While these interpretations do show a sensitivity to the broader context and narrative flow of Mark's Gospel, they too are criticised for failing to take cues from the immediate context.

In the last few decades, objections have been raised to the traditional interpretation, first and most notably by Addison G. Wright. Wright's challenge appeals both to everyday life experience, by which we would judge such a gesture an act of 'misguided piety', and the broader Markan context, including Jesus's statement on Corban (7:10-13), in which he condemns the religious authorities for elevating temple gifts over providing for the elderly.⁸ However, the bulk of his argument focuses on the immediate context: the

4. Adam Kubiś, 'The Poor Widow's Mites: A Contextual Reading of Mark 12:41-44', *Biblical Annals* 3 (2013): 340 n.2 mentions specifically: Xenophon, *Mem.*, 1.3.3; Aristotle, *Eth. nic.*, 4.1.19; Horace, *Carm.*, 3.23; Josephus, *A.J.* 6.149; Lev. Rab. 3:5; Midr. Teh. on Ps 22 §31; b. Menah. 104b, as well as a Buddhist source (*Sūtrāmkāra*, 4.22). See also William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 443; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 587.

5. E.g. Ernst Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu: Eine Erklärung des Markus-Evangeliums und der kanonischen Parallelen* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1966), 433, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111342962>; David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 481; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 559; Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 578-580; Lane, *Gospel of Mark*, 442-443.

6. See esp. discussion in Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 590; David E. Malick, 'The Poor Widow Who Gave at the Temple: Narrative Logic in Mark 12:41-44', *Priscilla Papers* 33 (2019): 9; Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 364-365.

7. Malick, 'Poor Widow', 8-12.

8. Wright, 'Widow's Mite', 256, 260-261. For a helpful summary of Wright's other arguments (and responses to them), see Gundry, *Mark*, 730-731; Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 359-362.

preceding episode (vv. 38-40), in which Jesus denounces the scribes for, among other things, devouring widows' houses (v. 40), and the pericope after it, in which he predicts the destruction of the temple. Wright dismisses options that point further back to the discussion on the greatest commandment (thus emphasising an attitude of whole-hearted commitment) or point forward to Jesus's own death, arguing instead that '[t]he context is immediately at hand ... Jesus condemns those scribes who devour the houses of widows, and then follows immediately the story of a widow whose house has beyond doubt just been devoured.'⁹ Jesus's words, then, are a lament over her 'misguided devotion', the corrupt temple cult, and the irony that, in light of Jesus's predictions about the temple immediately after, her costly gift was wasted. Taking Wright's lead, and drawing especially from the immediate context, numerous other scholars have developed the 'tragic' reading in various ways.¹⁰ The widow is variously presented as a tragic victim, a tragic hero, or a defiant protestor.¹¹ Lau even raises the interesting suggestion that the coins were not a gift but a deposit for safekeeping. Unlike the wealthy, who could afford to hedge their bets, the widow entrusted everything to the temple – a tragic mistake, as the next chapter reveals.¹²

In light of this discussion, many more recent commentators now opt for some combination of the above, offering a complex or nuanced interpretation. Thus, the widow herself remains a generally positive figure worthy of imitation, while the episode, chastened by the immediate context, also serves as a condemnation of the temple cult and its leadership. This is generally accomplished through both a closer and broader reading, so that Geoffrey Smith, for example, reads the story on 'two levels': that of the episode itself, giving a positive picture, and that of the Markan context, revealing 'the sham

9. Wright, 'Widow's Mite', 261, cf. 263.

10. See, e.g. R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 427–428; Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34B (Dallas: Word, 2001), 281–282; and survey in Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 340.

11. Peter-Ben Smit, 'An Unruly Widow in Mark 12', *Lectio Difficilior* 2 (2021): 1–20. See also his helpful summary of similar interpretations (pp. 1–5). Other noteworthy studies that take a broadly 'tragic' interpretation include Hisako Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 70–77; Michelle A. Connolly, *Disorderly Women and the Order of God: An Australian Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 151–156.

12. Markus Lau, 'Die Witwe, das Γαζοφυλάκιον und der Temple: Beobachtungen zur Mk Erzählung vom „Scherflein der Witwe“ (Mk 12,41-44)', *ZNW* 107 (2016): 186–205, <https://doi.org/10.1515/znw-2016-0011>. Cf. Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 346–347, who, though making similar lexical arguments, comes to very different conclusions.

religion of the nation's leaders'.¹³ Adam Kubiś, also appealing to context, notes poignantly that 'the immediate literary context of our pericope is usually limited to the three preceding verses (12:38-40) and the two following it (13:1-2)', but that, by broadening the context to include the discussion on the greatest commandment (v. 28), the widow is presented in a profoundly positive light.¹⁴ Similarly, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon broadens the context further, discussing 'six narrative contexts' that present the widow positively, in balance to Wright's negative reading of the close context.¹⁵ Other commentators simply advocate a synthetic view, in which the widow is commended in her own right, while also serving within the narrative as an implicit condemnation of the scribes.¹⁶ Indeed, a synthesis is generally the most likely way forward in this and most exegetical debates. Yet, with apologies to Hegel, we cannot be too quick to let ourselves off the exegetical hook, having our traditional pietist cake and eating our modern social critique too. For even if there is truth in both options, it is worth the effort to ask where the emphasis lies and why. More specifically, since so much of the discussion on this passage revolves around its 'context', the question must be raised how we delineate this context and on what grounds. Malbon and Kubiś critique Wright for limiting the context only to the episodes immediately before and after this one, but Wright counters, asking on what basis they can extend the context back farther. And if farther, how much farther? And having extended it, are they justified in synthesising apparently contradictory contextual cues? It is my contention that the Markan narrative does in fact give us cues that delineate the 'immediate context' and, in so doing, directs us in our synthesis. The widow episode is linked to each of

13. Geoffrey Smith, 'A Closer Look at the Widow's Offering: Mark 12:41-44', *JETS* 40 (1997): 28, 36.

14. Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 358, 365.

15. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, 'The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers', *CBQ* 53 (1991): 589-604. Though Malbon herself favors this positive reading, she chooses to celebrate the wealth of interpretive readings on this passage (p. 602). See also Eve-Marie Becker, 'Was die „arme Witwe“ lehrt: sozial- und motivgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu Mk 12,41-4', *NTS* 65 (2019): 148-165, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688518000346>.

16. E.g. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 488, who opts to link this passage with the one preceding it to create a contrast, noting that '[a]ny grouping of these concluding sections of chapter 12 is ... a little arbitrary.' While he is right that one's decision on how to group these passages will determine the interpretation of this passage in particular, it is my contention that the grouping, far from being arbitrary, should be determined by Mark's contextual cues, especially his catchwords.

the five episodes preceding it, not just in place and time and cast of characters, but also through Mark's use of catchwords.¹⁷

3. Catchwords

Catchwords are a highly effective rhetorical device found frequently in biblical literature and elsewhere in numerous genres and languages, ancient and modern. I will define the use of catchwords as *the application of similar words in two or more units of discourse in order to connect them in some way*.¹⁸ The nature of the resultant connection may be primarily structural, or it may contribute to meaning, whether thematic, comparative, or contrastive. Often both structural and interpretive functions occur simultaneously.¹⁹

In Markan studies, catchwords are frequently noted in various places, though there is as yet no extensive study on their application. By way of example, we may point to the accounts of Jairus's daughter and the haemorrhaging

17. Although Jesus enters the temple in 11:27, his first volley with the Sanhedrin is separated from the five disputations that follow (12:13-40) by the mention that the leaders 'left him and went away' (12:12), and that the next group of interlocutors came 'later' (12:13, NIV; on translation of this verse see further n. 39).

18. The objection has been raised that 'catchword' is not the appropriate term if we are not dealing with the identical word in both cases but 'similar' words, including semantic, phonological, and other similarities (see further below). However, the point is not that the words are the same, but that it is the words – identical or merely similar – rather than some other structural or literary feature that form the connections between passages. Similarly, it has been suggested that I am dealing with 'thematic' rather than verbal connections when the words are not identical, yet this is precisely what is not occurring. Numerous passages in Mark, including those considered here, have thematic connections – abstract concepts tied to the value-system of the narrative, such as self-sacrifice, or whole-hearted love for God. However, it is the more concrete links, such as catchwords, *Leitworte*, and literary motifs, that first signal a connection between passages, thus inviting the reader to consider more abstract connections as well. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and updated (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 120.

19. For the purposes of disambiguation, I will distinguish between 'catchword' as a broader category from 'hook word' or *mot-crochet*, which is a particular kind of catchword, occurring generally at the end of one pericope and the beginning of the next (see further below). I will also distinguish 'keywords', which are generally used within a single unit of text to reveal a theme or topic, though they may also function as catchwords if they are also used in another unit to connect the two. The German *Stichwort* will be treated as roughly synonymous with 'catchword' (e.g. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblischer Kommentar Über Die Psalmen* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1894), 746, 748), though it is often used as a yet-broader category, including all forms of keywords as well (cf. Delitzsch, *Psalmen*, 199, 711, 775).

woman (Mark 5:22-43), which, already connected by intercalation, are also further linked through the use of catchwords ‘twelve’ (δώδεκα) (vv. 25,42) and ‘daughter’ (θυγάτηρ) (vv. 23,34,35), both of which occur in both episodes while neither is particularly necessary for the story itself. Another obvious example is the string of ‘salt’ sayings in Mark 9:49-50, in which a series of otherwise disconnected sayings are connected by the catchword ἅλας/ἀλίζω, likely having occurred together even in Mark’s source.²⁰ Also noteworthy is the use of ἄρτος (‘bread’) in nearly every episode in Mark 6:6-8:21. Although the word is connected in some way to Mark’s thematic interests in that section (esp. 8:14-15), it is not properly a theme word, and seems often to appear simply to provide continuity and cohesion within this section of the narrative (see for example 7:2).

Although the phenomenon itself is well attested, the grounds for recognising it are more contested, and critics and advocates alike will agree that there is an inescapable element of subjectivity in the process. Nevertheless, several scholars have made significant contributions to the formulation of criteria by which catchwords can be recognised. The OT scholar James Nogalski, known for his study of catchwords in the Minor Prophets, offers a series of ‘subjectivity cross-checks’ by which legitimate instances can be distinguished from words that are repeated due to coincidence or other reasons.²¹ These include distinguishing catchwords from repetition due to *formula* (e.g. ‘Thus says the Lord’), preference for less common words (*frequency*), evidence of redactional activity (*literary homogeneity*), and the use of multiple catchwords or other connections to combine the units in question (*specific text combinations*).²² While this marks a major step forward in the study of catchwords, it is unfortunate that the labels Nogalski gives his criteria are not always particularly clear, and

20. Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu*, 332; Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 292; Hooker, *Gospel According to Mark*, 232-234; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 370, 379; Culpepper, *Mark*, 315. It will be assumed throughout that the final author/redactor of the Second Gospel (i.e. ‘Mark’) is ultimately responsible for the shape of his text. Even where wording may be attributable to a prior source, his decisions to retain or omit details make the text in this sense ‘Markan’.

21. James D. Nogalski, ‘Intertextuality and the Twelve’, in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, ed. James W. Watts and Paul R. House, JSOTSup 235 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 102-124.

22. Nogalski’s full list, after distinguishing from ‘formulas’, is ‘word frequency, word pairings, motif development, literary homogeneity, and specific text combinations’ (‘Intertextuality’, 109).

the criteria themselves can be counterintuitive.²³ Furthermore, his criteria leave unanswered several significant questions necessary for identifying catchwords: must the words share the same lemma, or may they be synonyms, antonyms, or even phonetically related?²⁴ Must the units in question be adjacent, or may they be separated from each other, and, if so, by how far?²⁵

A recent study by Daniel K. Eng is also noteworthy for the author's attempt to provide clearer and more objective guidelines. As principles, his rules point to the relative likelihood of a given catchword, and Eng is clear that not all principles need (or even can) be met.²⁶ Like Nogalski, Eng's criteria include the relative (in)frequency of the word in question ('scarcity') as well as the use of multiple catchwords. Eng's criterion that catchwords are more likely if picked up in the LXX is obviously only relevant for OT studies, but we might safely expand this to cover the history of interpretation more broadly. His preference for catchwords at the end of one section and the beginning of the next rightly points to the fact that catchwords are more likely if they conform to a recognisable pattern, but it does limit the usefulness of his criteria in evaluating catchwords that do not fit a pattern. Eng also adds to the discussion criteria such as the use of a catchword in different ways in the respective

23. His criterion of 'word pairings', for example, states that evidence of 'typically recurring word pairings [such as "light" and "darkness"] also decreases the likelihood of a deliberate allusion if no other criteria exist' (Nogalski, 'Intertextuality', 110). However, from his later explanation and examples, it appears that he rightly recognises that word pairs and antonyms *may*, and often do, function as catchwords, but since the similarity is less strong than the use of the same lexeme, these cases are more convincing when they occur in the presence of other indicators. Such a positive formulation would remove significant potential for misunderstanding, making this criterion much more useful.

24. The absence of this criterion is particularly unfortunate, since Nogalski has been criticised at times for being too accepting of potential lexical similarities. A simple explanation of what does and does not count as lexical similarity would do a great deal in strengthening his arguments. See for example Jonathan Gibson, *Covenant Continuity and Fidelity: A Study of Inner-Biblical Allusion and Exegesis in Malachi*, LHBOTS 625 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 18–19.

25. Nogalski deals mostly with adjacent units of text, though he does also treat non-adjacent ones. He does not, however, give an indication as to whether proximity is important ('Intertextuality', 112).

26. Daniel K. Eng, 'The Role of Semitic Catchwords in Interpreting the Epistle of James', *TynBul* 70 (2019): 245–267, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.27724>. Eng's seven criteria are: disparity of the sections; scarcity of the catchword in the entire document; more than one catchword connecting the two sections; catchwords occurring at the end of one section and the beginning of the next; catchwords in both Hebrew and Greek; catchword is not related to the main topic; catchword is used in different ways in the two sections. My thanks to Dr Eng for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

sections, catchwords that are not related to the main topic, and increased disparity between the units linked. These three all presumably indicate increased likelihood that a given word was deliberately chosen, thus reducing the likelihood of coincidence; in this respect, they are quite useful. At the same time, they also limit the scope of his study to the phenomenon he encounters in James. He presents a plausible argument based on catchwords that parts of James were composed using a method similar to *gezerah shawa*.²⁷ However, catchwords can also occur in other ways and for other reasons in other works, thus calling for other means of identification as well. His criteria, too, leave several important questions hanging, most notably what constitutes lexical similarity and whether linked passages must always be adjacent.

3.1 Criteria for Catchwords

While there are several other notable studies that deal with catchwords, few of them propose a systematic set of criteria for identification.²⁸ I therefore propose the following criteria, developed in dialogue with the above and with an eye toward the various examples in biblical literature. It must be stated that these criteria exist along a spectrum, so that the interpreter must determine the relative degree to which a given instance satisfies each criterion. Furthermore, though clear examples may meet most or even all of these criteria to some degree, this is certainly not always the case, nor is it necessary.

3.1.1 Similarity

Although the highest degree of similarity is usually lexical, first the same lexeme, and after that related forms and cognates, a lexical or etymological connection is by no means the only form of similarity, against some assertions to the contrary.²⁹ It is not necessary that the author/redactor use the very

27. Eng, 'Role of Semitic Catchwords', 258–260.

28. See George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, NovTSup 73 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 90–111, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004267060>; H. van Dyke Parunak, 'Transitional Techniques in the Bible', *JBL* 102 (1983): 525–548, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3260864>; Nicholas Perrin, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron*, AcBib 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Albert Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. James Swetnam, SubBi 12 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989). While not dealing specifically with catchwords, Hays' criteria for identifying echoes and allusions also prove useful (Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32). See also M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English* (London: Longman, 1976).

29. Interestingly, most practitioners studying catchwords do not insist on identical lexemes, while it is their critics who do, as seen above on criticisms of Nogalski. If

same word in both passages, but rather that one word is sufficiently evocative of the other that its later occurrence creates a link in the mind of the reader/hearer. Also highly evocative are semantic similarities: first synonyms, then near synonyms, many of which are subordinates under a shared superordinate category. Other helpful categories are antonyms or opposing pairs, composite parts (e.g. bread/yeast), or broader association through a shared semantic field (e.g. moon/night/sleep). Phonological similarity (rhyming, alliteration, assonance, etc.) as well as syntactical or morphological similarities may also create or strengthen a verbal connection, though these often require other factors to strengthen and confirm them.³⁰

3.1.2 Distinctiveness

Relatively uncommon words are more distinctive, as are words that are repeated in a given pericope or that occur in a higher-than-usual frequency in a particular section.³¹ Even relatively common words are more distinctive when they occur within a set phrase (e.g. καὶ ἔλεγεν/καὶ λέγει in Mark 4:1-34, 35-41 (vv. 2,9,11,13,21,24,26,30,35)), at a critical moment in the pericope, or as a part of a quotation (e.g. βλέπω/ώραω in Mark 4:3,12, 24; cf. Isa 6:9-10).

3.1.3 Recurrence

Recurrence refers to the repeated use of a given word/phrase as a catchword in other passages as well (e.g. ἄρτος in Mark 6:6-8:21).

3.1.4 Editorial Activity³²

Evidence that the author/redactor has employed distinct compositional strategies in the unit(s) in question increases the likelihood that the similarity is deliberate rather than coincidental. Signs can include transitional or summary statements, narrative or editorial glosses, intercalation, idiolect, interruptions in the logical or narrative flow, or the connection of otherwise

most scholars recognise that intertextual allusions and echoes do not require identical wording, why should it be necessary for intra-textual allusions, like catchwords?

30. On the various possible forms of lexical similarity, see esp. Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion*, 285.

31. The use of συνδών in Mark 14:51-52 and 15:46 is frequently seen as a catchword between the two passages, in large part because the word is used four times in these verses (twice in each passage), and nowhere else in Mark, nor in the NT outside of the Synoptic parallels. See esp. Albert Vanhoye, 'La fuite du jeune homme nu (Mc 14,51-52)', *Bib 52* (1971): 401-406, and discussion in Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 688-695.

32. By 'editorial', I refer broadly to the process by which a text is shaped into its final form. Editorial adjustments may be made to the wording or arrangement of both source material (oral or written) and the author's own words to achieve unity, cohesion, and other desired literary and theological purposes for the composition.

disparate passages. The use of a possible catchword in different ways in the respective passages (e.g. ἄλας in Mark 9:49-50), or the inclusion of apparently unnecessary details (e.g. δώδεκα in 5:25,42) are also common indicators. When relevant, a comparison of parallel passages may also reveal redactional activity or compositional design.

3.1.5 *Pattern and Proximity*

Conformity to a common pattern increases the probability of catchwords. For our purposes, the most common pattern is the 'hook word', a word which appears at the end of one passage and the beginning of the next, though numerous variations and related patterns (including 'hinge' and 'linked keyword') have been helpfully described, especially by Parunak.³³ Although passages need not be adjacent to be linked by catchwords, their proximity to each other may also be an indicator of relative probability.³⁴

3.1.6 *Convergence*

The convergence of multiple catchwords between two units, or the convergence of other indications of a connection between the units, increases probability. The latter may include such literary devices as intercalation, inclusio, setting, summary statements, or other markers that suggest that the passages in question are meant to be read together.

3.1.7 *Coherence*

The degree to which the alleged connection coheres with patterns of structure, theme, and style within the work overall helps the interpreter evaluate whether the connection fits and is useful in interpretation. One must also pay attention to the author's rhetorical/literary style regarding the use of catchwords – are they used elsewhere in the book and in the same sort of ways?

3.1.8 *History of Interpretation*

Finally, catchwords are most convincing when they have been caught by multiple readers, ancient and modern. In our case, this includes synoptic parallels, manuscript tradition, and ancient and modern commentators.

33. Parunak, 'Transitional Techniques', 547; Guthrie, *Structure of Hebrews*, 111.

34. It may also be noted that, as a general rule, passages adjacent or close to each other are generally linked for structural or thematic reasons, while more distant passages linked by catchwords are generally linked for purposes of mutual interpretation (comparison, contrast, common motif, etc.).

3.2 The Purpose or Effect of Catchwords

Before returning to our passage, a word must also be said about the purpose or effect of catchwords. As Nogalski insightfully quips, ‘Having established the plausibility and/or likelihood that someone deliberately created these links, one then turns to the most significant (and perhaps the most difficult) question: WHY?’³⁵ Broadly speaking, catchwords can be used for purposes of structure and meaning, with the understanding that, like all rhetorical and literary devices, a catchword may serve multiple purposes at once. When used to create structure, catchwords can either create coherence within a subsection, as is often the case when a string of passages is linked by one or more catchwords, or they can serve as a transitional device between separate sections. In the case of the former, the catchwords may also contribute to meaning, but in the case of the latter, generally no significant influence on the meaning is intended.³⁶ Catchwords used to contribute to or create meaning may draw parallels, make a comparison or contrast, highlight a common theme, or develop a theme or motif. Often the intended interpretation becomes clear once the connection between passages is made, but it can also be the case that a connection is made in order to invite the reader into further reflection.³⁷

4. Catchwords in Mark 12:41-44

4.1 Mark 12:13-44 as a Whole

With these criteria established, we can now return to the passage at hand. The episode of the widow at the temple (vv. 41-44) appears at the end of a lengthy series of encounters between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities in the temple, apparently all in a single day. After an initial volley in which the chief

35. Nogalski, ‘Intertextuality’, 112, emphasis original.

36. The use of ἄρτος in Mark 6:6–8:21 serves to create cohesion within a subsection of the Markan narrative within which we see the disciples’ increasing involvement in Jesus’s ministry, and the concept of bread may be tied to various thematic concerns in this section, such as divine provision and the kingdom of God. On the other hand, the numerous words repeated between Mark 15:45-47 and 16:1-2 (μνημεῖον, λίθον ἐπί τῃν θύραν/ἐκ τῆς θύρας, Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή, Μαρία) serve to facilitate the transition between two sections of the narrative (i.e. Jesus’s burial and his resurrection). These hook words create a sense of continuity through the transition, but they do not invite further interpretation of the respective passages.

37. Cf. Dean B. Deppe, *The Theological Intentions of Mark’s Literary Devices: Markan Intercalations, Frames, Allusionary Repetitions, Narrative Surprises, and Three Types of Mirroring* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 35, who argues that most of Mark’s literary devices (including catchwords) are an invitation to the reader to pause for theological reflection.

priests, teachers of the law, and elders question his authority (11:27-33) and Jesus responds with the parable of the wicked tenants (12:1-12), the opponents appear soundly defeated and withdraw to regroup (12:12). Next comes a series of five disputations (12:13-40), as various groups approach Jesus with various questions and then he responds with questions of his own (vv. 13-40).³⁸ Finally, as a sort of epilogue, Jesus observes the widow with her two coins while he is sitting ‘facing the treasury’ (κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου). This concludes the temple encounters, for in the next scene Jesus is seen departing the temple with his disciples, whereupon he predicts its destruction (13:1-2).³⁹

Several important features already suggest that these six short episodes are meant to be read in context together. They share a common setting in the temple, occurring apparently one after another. They share a similar format, with each group in turn approaching Jesus or being addressed by him regarding a question relevant to their identity.⁴⁰ On top of this, in addition to the catchwords linking each episode to the final one, which we will examine shortly, several catchwords serve to link all six episodes together. Most notably, a form of διδάσκω or its cognates (διδάσκαλος or διδαχή) appears in each of the five disputations (vv. 14(x2),19,32,35,38), often unnecessarily (esp. vv. 35,38).⁴¹ We also note that the last three disputations are linked by the

38. While in our present section each of the groups is mentioned on its own (apart from the Herodians, who are mentioned with the Pharisees, v. 13), they also appear to represent the religious leadership as a whole, including the temple cult, both because they are apparently sent by the Sanhedrin (v. 13), and because the disputations take place in the temple, in response to Jesus’s authoritative actions there (cf. 11: 27-28).

39. While we will focus on links between the widow episode and the pericopae preceding it, this does not deny other links, especially with the account of the woman anointing Jesus (14:3-9), who also gives a costly gift which also foreshadows Jesus’s death (see for example Malbon, ‘Poor Widow’, 598-599). Indeed, it is quite common for transitional passages in Mark to point in both directions (cf. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 12).

40. This section can be distinguished from the earlier episodes in the temple (11:27-12:12) in that the earlier episodes are somewhat longer, that they deal with questions of authority more broadly rather than particular theological issues, that they involve the Sanhedrin as a whole rather than the various groups that make it up, and by an apparent break in time – the NIV very appropriately translates v. 13 with ‘Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians’ (emphasis added).

41. Though the lexeme does not occur in the widow narrative, the concept is evoked through several details: that Jesus is sitting (καθίσας, v. 41), thus taking the posture of teaching; that he calls his disciples to him (προσκαλεσάμενος, v. 43); and that he speaks using an ‘amen’ formula (ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν, v. 43). See Malbon, ‘Poor Widow’, 600-601; Kubiś, ‘Poor Widow’s Mites’, 355; cf. Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 589-590; Gundry, *Mark*, 517; Evans, *Mark*, 283; contra Wright, ‘Widow’s Mites’, 262.

catchword γραμματεύς (vv. 28,32,35,38).⁴² Finally, this section is linked to the section following (13:1-36) through the catchwords καὶ + καθίζω + κατέναντι (v. 41; 13:3).⁴³ These broad observations, then, already contribute to the criteria of *convergence* and *editorial activity*.⁴⁴

4.2 Mark 12:41–44 and the Five Disputations

The first disputation, about the imperial tax or κῆνσος (vv. 13-17), involves the Roman denarius (δηνάριον). Mark's *editorial addition* in v. 42 that the widow's two lepta (λεπτοί) equal one quadrans (κοδράντης) is thus not merely a helpful conversion reference, but it serves to heighten the *similarity* to the denarius. As the lowest Roman coin in existence, the quadrans was the functional antonym of the denarius, in the same way that a penny and a \$100 bill are antonyms today, for while the denarius was by no means the largest coin in mint, it was the largest in everyday circulation, and, in Mark's Gospel, the standard denomination for referring to large sums of money (cf. 6:37; 14:5). The connection is strengthened by the *distinctiveness* of the coins, both appearing at the climax of their respective episodes. The words λεπτός and κοδράντης are further distinctive in that both appear only here in Mark. Significant related terms, 'image' (εἰκῶν) and 'inscription' (ἐπιγραφή) in v. 16 and 'copper coins' (χαλκόν) in v. 41, fall in the semantic field of coins and thus further increase the distinctiveness of the words denarius and lepton/quadrans, respectively.⁴⁵ Finally, there is a certain *coherence* that emerges when one realises that both

42. See Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 578; France, *Gospel of Mark*, 485; Gundry, *Mark*, 709.

43. Καὶ καθίσας κατέναντι τοῦ γαζοφυλακίου (12:41) // Καὶ καθημένου αὐτοῦ ... κατέναντι τοῦ ἱεροῦ (13:3). The preposition κατέναντι is particularly distinctive, also occurring in only one other place in Mark (11:2). The catchword connection here is an example of hook words or *mots-crochet*, in which a word or phrase occurring towards the end of one section and the beginning of the next facilitates a transition between the two.

44. Only brief comment can be made on Synoptic parallels, with an eye to *history of interpretation*. It cannot be said with certainty whether Matthew or Luke were aware of Mark's literary purposes, since neither retains all six pericopae in the same progression. However, it can be said that Luke retains the widow narrative (Luke 21:1-4) as well as some of the catchwords with those preceding narratives that he does retain in the same progression. Matthew, though he does not retain the widow narrative, adds in its place the seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:13-39), along with catchwords of his own with the preceding episodes (esp. the use of ὑποκριταί in 22:18; 23:13,15,23,25,27,28,29). It is thus plausible that both Evangelists were aware of what Mark had accomplished.

45. The word χαλκός in v. 41 is appropriately translated 'money' in most EVV. Nevertheless, the literal meaning 'copper' creates an interesting tie with the widow's copper coins.

coins, the denarius and the quadrans, are mentioned in the context of giving God his due.⁴⁶

In the second disputation, in which the Sadducees raise the question of marriage and the resurrection (vv. 18-27), their chosen case study revolves around a widow. The precise lexeme *χήρα* is almost unnecessary, given the panoply of semantically related words in this episode: *γυνή* occurs six times (vv. 19(x2),20,22,23(x2)); regarding the death of the husband, *ἀποθνήσκω* occurs four times, (vv. 19,20,21,22), *καταλείπω* twice (vv. 19,21), and *ἀφήμι* three times (vv. 19,20,22); regarding the marriage, *γαμέω* occurs twice (v. 25(x2)), and *λαμβάνω* three times (vv. 19,20,21). This does not include the more broadly related terms like resurrection (*ἀνάστασις*), living (*ζώντων*), and dead (*νεκρῶν*) in Jesus's reply. That the word *γυνή* used in the context of these terms falls within the semantic field of *χήρα* (as superordinate category) is evidenced by its being rendered 'widow' in many modern translations (NIV, ESV, NRSV).⁴⁷ The repetition just noted of the semantically related terms, as well as the repetition of *χήρα* in the widow episode (vv. 42,43) contributes to their *distinctiveness*. The word *χήρα* itself is further distinct in that it occurs in Mark only in the widow episode (vv. 42,43) and the episode before it (v. 40), which we shall discuss below. Furthermore, the widow is the central figure, and indeed the only significant figure, in both stories. Finally, the *recurrence* of *χήρα* as a catchword also in the fifth disputation (v. 40) further supports its use as such here.

The third and final question put to Jesus comes from 'one of the scribes' (vv. 28-34). The opening pattern is similar to that of the previous two exchanges: a representative from a group approaches Jesus with a difficult question, which he answers cleverly, putting the group in question to shame. At the same time, the scribe is apparently favourably disposed towards Jesus (v. 28), does not appear to be trying to entrap him, and is even commended by him, albeit backhandedly (v. 34).⁴⁸ The primary lexical *similarity* is the word *ὅλος* with respect to one's life or being: *ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς* and *ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος* in v. 30 and

46. Even if one opts for Wright's tragic reading outlined above, it must be argued that, from the perspective of the widow, she was indeed giving God what was due him.

47. Codex Sinaiticus has the addition of *γυνή* in v. 42 to identify the woman in the temple, thus providing greater lexical similarity between the two passages. This is an attractive variant, given that such redundancy of detail is quite in keeping with Markan style and that there is little reason for the addition of the word but plenty of reason for its omission. Nevertheless, the poor attestation (only *ⲛ* among early mss.) makes the reading questionable.

48. Though cf. Gundry, *Mark*, 710, who suggests that the scribe, in noticing that Jesus answered well (v. 28), may not necessarily be more favourably inclined towards

ὅλον τὸν βίον in v. 44. The word βίος is semantically related to both terms in that, like ψυχή, it can refer to life, and like ἰσχύς in this context, to possessions. As is commonly noted, the latter term is used here to render the מֵוֹד (meod) of Deuteronomy 6:5 (in place of δύναμις in most LXX mss., though cf. 4 Kgdms 23:25), which refers to physical power or might, including worldly goods, and is even translated מַמּוֹנָה (mamona - possessions) in the targums.⁴⁹ Though none of these words are particularly uncommon, their occurrence in a phrase – and, particularly, a phrase drawn from such an important OT quotation – adds considerably to their *distinctiveness*, as does the repetition of this phrase four times in v. 30 and three times in v. 33. Likewise, the *distinctiveness* of the phrase ὅλον τὸν βίον in the widow narrative comes from its climactic placement as the final words of this episode (v. 44). Regarding *editorial activity*, the redundant phrase ὅλον τὸν βίον is typical of Mark and thus likely his addition.⁵⁰ Also significant for our discussion is the fact that the pericope, with its apparently positive portrayal of the scribe, fits somewhat awkwardly with those before it, which are universally negative towards Jesus's interlocutors, and with those that follow, which are negative towards the scribes specifically. This is evidenced in that parallel accounts present this encounter negatively as well, and Luke apparently even relocates it to a different context (cf. Matt 22:34-36; Luke 10:25-28).⁵¹ Yet, if this episode slightly interrupts the narrative progression, at the same time, it fits very well thematically. The conclusion of this encounter, namely that wholehearted devotion to God surpasses even cultic offerings (v. 33), *coheres* very well with the account of the widow, whose sacrificial gift surpasses all the others, and it is significant that it is this particular phrase 'with all one's life/possessions' that links the two passages. As mentioned above, this connection is noted by multiple commentators in the *history of interpretation*.⁵²

In the fourth disputation (vv. 35-37), Jesus is now the questioner, asking how the 'scribes' say that the Messiah is the son of David. The words πολὺς

him but may simply 'indicate a desire to do a better job than they of dragging Jesus into a theological quagmire'.

49. France, *Gospel of Mark*, 479. See also Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 590, who notes a similar interpretation of מֵוֹד in the DSS.

50. Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu*, 433. Note also discussion over the differences in wording in Mark's account with the LXX of Deut 6:4-5 on the one hand and the later Synoptics on the other (Matt 22:34-36; cf. Luke 10:25-28) (see Evans, *Mark*, 261-262; Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 565-571).

51. See France, *Gospel of Mark*, 476; cf. Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu*, 412-414.

52. Yarbro Collins, *Mark*, 590; Malick, 'Poor Widow', 9; Kubiś, 'Poor Widow's Mites', 364-365.

and ὄχλος occur in the concluding detail that ‘the great crowd listened to him gladly’ (ὁ πολὺς ὄχλος ἤκουεν αὐτοῦ ἡδέως – v. 37) as well as in v. 41. Although both terms are fairly common in Mark, the phrase here in v. 37 is somewhat *distinct* given its final placement in the pericope as well as its interruption of the narrative. It is also noteworthy that the crowd has been noticeably absent in this chapter, and this is their first mention.⁵³ In the widow episode, πολὺς gains distinctiveness from its repetition in the poignant and alliterative statement that ‘many rich people threw in much’ (πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλά – v. 41), as well as the similarly alliterative statement of Jesus that ‘this poor widow threw in more than all the others (ἡ χήρα αὕτη ἢ πτωχὴ πλεῖον πάντων ἔβαλεν – v. 43). The poetic nature of v. 41 suggests an editorial hand, and the statement in v. 37, functioning as it does as a summary statement or narrative gloss, likewise suggests *editorial activity*.⁵⁴ The *pattern* is similar to what Guthrie calls ‘distant hook words’. The catchwords occur at the end of the one pericope (v. 37) and at the beginning of the other (v. 41), with one pericope intervening, which is also linked to the first with catchwords, in this case γραμματεὺς (vv. 35,38).⁵⁵ Finally, there is *coherence* in that both passages show Jesus’s unique authority and ability to see beyond the physical reality that the crowds see (the lineage of the messiah or the value of a coin) to a deeper reality.⁵⁶

In the fifth and final disputation (vv. 38-40), ‘while he was teaching’, Jesus denounces the scribes for showy religion that is not only empty but even preys on the vulnerable.⁵⁷ In addition to the catchwords γραμματεὺς and διδασκαλίη noted above, the most significant catchword in this passage is χήρα (v. 40). Not only is this the same word that appears in vv. 42 and 43 (*similarity*), but the word only appears in these two passages in Mark (*distinctiveness*). As noted above, however, the second disputation (vv. 18-27) contains numerous catchwords semantically related to the concept of widow (*recurrence*). There is some evidence of *editorial*

53. Before this, they are mentioned in a similar comment in 11:18 and then obliquely in 11:32.

54. The summary statement is a typical Markan emphasis as the gospel frequently refers to similar responses by the crowd (1:22,27; 2:12; 6:2; 7:37; 9:15; 10:24,26; 11:18; 12:17). Cf. Evans, *Mark*, 275–276.

55. See Guthrie, *Structure of Hebrews*, 96–97. In Guthrie’s formulation, the pericope in the middle is also usually of a different genre. This may be the case here as well, since vv. 38–40 have the form of a diatribe rather than a narrative as such.

56. On interpretation of this passage, see Culpepper, *Mark*, 424; Evans, *Mark*, 276.

57. Various specific interpretative options have been proposed for ‘devouring widows’ houses’, none of them good. See Evans, *Mark*, 279; Edwards, *Gospel According to Mark*, 379.

activity in vv. 41 and 42, especially Mark's explanation that two lepta make a quadrans (v. 42).⁵⁸ This pair of catchwords also matches the *pattern* for hook words, appearing at the seams between two contiguous passages, which is one of the reasons for being frequently noted in the *history of interpretation*.⁵⁹ Most significantly, the juxtaposition between the widow, who gives all she has to live on, and the scribes, who devour the homes (and, apparently, livelihoods) of widows, is apt and easily recognisable, giving it a strong *coherence*.

5. Synthesis and Conclusion

It is lamentable that, throughout the ages, this familiar story has been a cause of guilt for, or even coercion of, the financially vulnerable in the church. Those who are in a position to receive or ask for widows' coins would do very well to heed the warning of v. 40. In his insightful and provocative challenge to the traditional interpretation of this famous vignette, Wright is thus right to appeal to context. Seen in this light, the widow is the embodiment of the tragic abuse for which Jesus has just denounced the scribes in the previous verse, and perhaps evidence justifying the destruction of the temple that he will predict in the verses following. Those who would see a positive message in this story must either deny the immediate context altogether, or else provide justification for extending the context beyond the immediately preceding passage. Though some scholars appeal to a plurality of contexts, none argue decisively for why their additional contexts should be considered on the same level as the passages immediately surrounding this account.

However, when one takes into consideration the contextual cues left by Mark – namely, the cluster of catchwords that give cohesion to this section and link this episode to the five that precede it – a broader and more complex context arises. The widow gives to God what is God's, paying not in the coin of Caesar's power politics, but the coin of her very life (vv. 13-17). She can do this by hoping to regain her life, in contrast to the Sadducees, who would use a

58. In addition to the coin conversion, scholars note the following features as likely due to Mark's editorial hand: (1) the juxtaposition between the widow and the scribes in vv. 38-40, suggesting deliberate placement; (2) the mention of Jesus sitting, possibly to draw a connection with 13:3; and (3) the repetition of γαζοφυλάκιον, which is typical of Mark's style and is missing in the Lukan parallel. See discussion in Gundry, *Mark*, 730-732.

59. Even those who show no awareness of the 'negative' interpretation are nevertheless aware of the catchword connection (e.g. Haenchen, *Der Weg Jesu*, 433). Thus Wright, 'Widow's Mite', 261, observes 'Virtually every commentator notes the linkage of the two units by the catchword "widow".'

widow's story to deny the hope of the resurrection (vv. 18-27). In so doing, she is fulfilling the greatest commandment, loving God with all she has (vv. 28-34). Jesus, sitting and teaching in the temple, claims unique messianic authority to see beyond the literal and thus overturn popular opinion (vv. 35-37). Thus, in the final two episodes, he makes explicit the implicit contrast that has been developing, first condemning the scribes for abusing widows for selfish gain (vv. 38-40) and then commending a widow for her selfless sacrifice (vv. 41-44). When these pericopae are linked through their common setting, themes, and catchwords, the widow episode appears as an epilogue to the five disputations, and the widow herself emerges as a pious figure worthy of imitation, even more than when the passage is taken in isolation. In giving all she has, she models not only sacrificial giving, but the perfect life of discipleship, fulfilling the greatest commandment and even anticipating Christ's own sacrificial death. At the same time, she is undeniably a foil revealing the cupidity and corruption of the hypocritical leaders. Their harsh treatment of widows like her is one reason for the downfall of their whole administration, predicted in the next chapter. Yet none of this nullifies the value of her gift.⁶⁰ Her gift of her life was not made less precious for being given to a doomed institution governed by corrupt administrators, any more than Jesus's own sacrifice was for being carried out at the hands of wicked men. In this context, she invites us all to follow her example – and Christ's – to give not just our copper, but our very lives.

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60. Contra Wright, 'Widow's Mite', 263, who concludes that, in light of ch. 13, 'the final irony of it all was that it was also a waste'.

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