

The Last Verses Of Mark #1

Modern textual criticism often seeks to undermine the authenticity of God's word. One of the paths to this goal is an attempt to say that certain scriptures do not belong in the Bible. There are some passages that are more difficult to authenticate (i.e., John 7:59-8:11, Acts 8:37, and 1 John 5:7-8), but some of the harshest criticism has been leveled against Mark 16:9-20.

For many years, textual critics have stated that the last verses of Mark do not belong in his gospel. In fact, even some study Bibles go so far as to say that Mark 16:16 can be discounted because it was not originally in the Bible. Although all doctrine found in the last verses of Mark can be found in other places, the argument that the verses do not belong is a serious blow to the reliability of the scriptures. This two-part article will examine the internal and external evidence of verses 9-20 to determine if they belong in our Bibles.

As far as attestation of the gospel of Mark, we have three papyrus manuscripts, from the third, fourth, and eighth century, but all of these are fragmentary and none contain the last chapters. There are 31 uncial (all capital letters) manuscripts that contain chapter 16. The oldest of these are codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, which date from the fourth century. Four others date from the fifth century, and the rest range from the sixth to the eleventh centuries. Then we have a large number of minuscule (cursive) manuscripts that date from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. In addition to these Greek manuscripts of Mark's gospel, we also have witnesses to its text in the ancient versions and in citations from early Christian writers.

The gospel of Mark has five different endings in the manuscript tradition. They are, from shortest to longest:

- The ones that end at our 16:8.
- The one that ends with a "shorter ending."
- Those that contain the "longer ending," familiar to us as verses 9-20.
- Those that contain both the "shorter ending" and the "longer ending."
- The expanded version of the "longer reading" found in one manuscript.

Scholars generally dismiss (2) and (5) as being too poorly attested to be probable. The fourth can also be dismissed as being a mixture of (2) and (3). That leaves (1) and (3) as the more probable of the five.

The first ending is the “harder” reading. But as it stands, it leaves the gospel of Mark sounding incomplete. It contains no resurrection appearances, as in the other three gospels. If this were the true rendering, it might be easy to see how a scribe might, somewhere along the line, add a more appropriate ending to Mark. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine a scribe cutting out these verses, which include resurrection appearances and the commission to teach the gospel, and leaving it to end with the words, “For they were afraid.” Also, the vocabulary is noticeably different from that of the rest of the gospel of Mark. Additionally, verse 9 strangely refers to “Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had seven devils,” when Mary had already been introduced in verse one.

For these reasons, textual critics today generally reject the “longer ending” as an independent composition. They conclude that these verses were added later, probably to finish what seemed to be an uncompleted book. But is this correct? Let’s review the internal evidence.

The first internal evidence argument involves Mark’s vocabulary. Of the 75 significant words in verses 9-20, Alford showed that 17 do not appear elsewhere in Mark. In other words, the claim is made that more than a third of the words are not normally used by Mark. Textual critics say that this difference in makes it difficult to believe that they both came from the same author. But John Broadus demonstrated that 17 words occur in the twelve preceding verses of Mark that are not found anyplace else in the gospel either! This is a startling exposure of the fragile foundation upon which this critical structure has been erected. Moreover, McGarvey discovered that there are nine words in the last twelve verses of Luke’s gospel that are not elsewhere used in his narrative, yet no textual critic has ever raised a doubt as to their authenticity. John William Burgon wrote:

Nothing I presume can be fairer than to elect that, once more, our attention be chiefly directed to what is contained within the twelve verses (verses 9-20) of Mark’s first chapter which exactly correspond with the twelve verses of his last chapter (verses 9-20) which are the subject of the present volume. Now between these two sections of the gospel, besides (1) the obvious verbal resemblance, I detect (2) a singular parallelism of essential structure. And this does not strike me the less forcibly because nothing of the kind was to have been expected.

Now this, to say the least, shows that there exists an unmistakable

relation of sympathy between the first page of Mark's gospel and the last. The same doctrinal phraseology, the same indications of Divine purpose, the same prevailing cast of thought is observed to occur in both: (i.) A gospel to be everywhere preached; (ii) Faith to be required of all; (iii) Baptism to be universally administered; (iv) "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" -- is not this the theme of the beginning of Mark's gospel as well as the end of it? Surely it is as if on comparing the two extremities of a chain, with a view to ascertaining whether the fabric is identical or not, it were discovered that those extremities are even meant to clasp.

Furthermore, the concluding section agrees with all other accounts of the resurrection and, as Lenski argues, with the beginning of Mark's work.

The second internal evidence involves Mark's style. Five objections have been raised concerning the "awkward" juncture of verses 8 and 9 because: (1) the subject of verse 8 is the women, whereas Jesus is the presumed subject of verse 9; (2) the other women of verses 1-8 are forgotten in verses 9-20; (3) in verse 9 Mary Magdalene is identified even though she has been mentioned in verse 1; (4) the use of *anastas de* ("Now risen") and the position of *proton* ("first") do not fit in a continuation of verses 1-8; and, (5) the use of the conjunction *gar* ("for") at the end of verse 8 is very abrupt.

With regard to juncture, the transition between verses 8 and 9 does seem awkward. An exact parallel cannot be found elsewhere in Mark; however, the first two features are found together several times in the book (2:13; 6:45; 7:31; 8:1; 14:3). Thus the first two objections are not valid.

The third objection is that Mary Magdalene is identified in verse 9 as "out of whom he had cast seven devils" even though she has been mentioned in verse 1. However, this is not an identifying phrase; it is rather a type of flashback that gives additional information. This occurs four other times in Mark (3:16, 17; 6:16; 7:26). Thus we see that giving additional information is not foreign to Mark. Therefore, the third objection is not valid either.

The fourth objection to the juncture between the two sections of Mark is that the use of *anastas de* ("Now risen") and the position of *proton* ("first") in verse 9 do not fit in a continuation of verses 1-8. But verse 9 is not a continuation of the section found in verses 1-8; it is the start of a new one. The resurrection of Christ is established by two facts: the

empty tomb (vss. 1-8) and His appearances (vss. 9-14). Thus the words are appropriate, because it starts a new section. The fourth objection is not valid either.

Perhaps the most serious objection with regard to juncture is that verse 8 ends with the conjunction *gar* ("for"), which is very abrupt. The final clause of verse 8 ("for they were afraid") has only two words in Greek. Since the word *gar* cannot stand at the beginning of a Greek sentence, it is found at the end. There are no other two word clauses containing *gar* in Mark, but there are word clauses including three and four words (Mark 1:16, 38; 3:21; 5:42; 9:49; 11:18; 14:70; 15:14; 16:4) that contain *gar*. Thus Mark did know how to use *gar* in short sentences.

Although all the stylistic features of this section are not found together elsewhere in Mark, they are found elsewhere in Mark and thus this juncture is indeed his in style. Next week we will examine the external evidence to show that verses 9-20 are indeed authentic.

Kyle Campbell