

## **Is the ending of Mark real?**

Read Mark 16:9-20

### **Introduction**

You may have wondered why we ended our journey through Mark's Gospel at chapter 16:8, and not at the last verse in your Bibles, verse 20. You may have also noticed in your Bibles that those verses (vv.9-20) are bracketed with a note to the effect of "the earliest manuscripts do not contain these verses."

What is going on here? Is there a mistake in our Bibles? If so, can we even trust what's in our Bibles? Try and address all this now. Dealing with what theologians call "textual criticism" – science of reading the manuscripts of Scripture.

### **The original manuscripts of the NT**

We know that the original text of the various Gospels and letters that make up what we know to be the New Testament Scripture were written by the apostles and those within the apostolic circle, between around 45 AD and 90 AD. That period of time is very soon after the time Jesus was on earth (crucifixion around 33AD) – written by eyewitnesses of the resurrection and those who knew those who were eyewitnesses. All of these texts were written in Koine Greek – the lingua franca of the Greco-Roman world, understood by everyone within the Roman empire, "peoples" language, the common Greek, not sophisticated classical Greek.

What we need to firstly understand is that the vast majority of these texts were recognised to be canonical (to be God's Word) by the early church almost immediately after they were written. Peter writing in the first century, recognises that Paul's letters are inspired, in 2 Peter 3:15-16 he calls them "Scriptures". There was debate concerning the canonicity of a few books, namely Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation, but they were eventually accepted. There were other writings that were considered, but were ultimately rejected. These include: The Didache, The Shepherd of Hermes and 1 Clement.<sup>1</sup> By 150 AD,

---

<sup>1</sup> Nothing contained in these documents goes against the orthodox doctrine.

the Church Fathers Irenaeus and Clement had recognised most of the books of the New Testament as canon. The full list was later ratified by various church councils. By 397 AD there was general consensus of the canon as we know it today. Yet most of it was already recognised as such before 100 AD.<sup>2</sup>

What we also need to understand is that none of those original manuscripts that Paul and the rest of them wrote, exist today. The manuscripts from which our NT has been translated are copies of the originals, many of them copies of copies. The earliest manuscripts that exist, date from 135 AD, up to the latest, which date to 1200 AD. There are around 5000 manuscripts that exist today. Some of these are little fragments, a little bigger than a postage stamp, while others are complete manuscripts, containing every book of the NT. The incredible thing about these vast number of manuscripts is that there is remarkable agreement between them. Over 99% agreement. Gives us great confidence that what we have in our NT is in fact God's Word, that has been accurately and faithfully preserved through the ages.

### **External issues**

The ending of Mark is an exception to all this. The two oldest and most important manuscripts of the NT (each have a name) – Codex Vaticanus (B) and Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ) (both dating from the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) do not contain Mark 16:9-20, along with several other early manuscripts and translations (e.g. the earliest Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Georgian translations). Neither do church fathers, Clement of Alexandria (150-210 AD) and Origen (184-253 AD) show any awareness of these verses in their writings. Even other church fathers at a later date – namely Eusebius (260-339 AD) and Jerome (342 – 420 AD) tell us in their writings that vv.9-20 were absent from the majority of Greek manuscripts of Mark of which they knew.

Despite verses 9-20 being absent from some of the earliest manuscripts, the vast majority of manuscripts do contain them. What is considered more important in textual criticism is not the amount of manuscripts that exist, but how early they date from. Generally speaking, earlier manuscripts are more accurate. But even many of those manuscripts that do contain

---

<sup>2</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Prolegomena*, 394-405.

these verses add scribal notes doubting their authenticity. It is clear that there was doubt regarding these verses right from the early church.

### **Internal issues**

The longer ending of Mark is also doubted, not just because of the lack of early manuscripts that contain these verses, but also because of the content of the text. Let's have a look at some of these issues:

- Mary Magdalene is introduced in v.9 like a new comer, as the one from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. This information seems strange as she was referred to just before in v.1. Odd to add information like that after a character has already been introduced.
- In v.19, Jesus is referred to as the "Lord Jesus". Throughout Mark's Gospel, he never refers to Jesus in this manner. Mark always refers to him, simply as "Jesus."
- In vv.9-20 there are an unusually high number of new words used, that the rest of Mark's Gospel does not contain. There are 18 new words used in these verses, in addition to several unique word forms and constructs that are not present in the rest of Mark.
- Many stylistic features, associated with the way Mark writes, are also absent from these verses. More obvious in the Greek, but you can even notice it in English. Feels different from the rest of Mark.
- There are also brand new themes introduced in these verses that are not present before, some even contradict the rest of the Gospel. E.g. Jesus' chastisement of his disciples disbelief (vv.11, 14, 16). The "signs" of gospel ministry – new languages, picking up snakes, poison – not in rest of Mark – seems odd (though are found in other parts of NT).

Because of both these external factors (manuscripts) and internal factors (text itself) it is highly improbable that vv.9-20 are the original ending of Mark. All evidence points to it being a later addition. Even though it's a later addition, it is still old. Irenaeus refers to v.19 of it in around 170 AD. This means it can be dated to the mid-second century (It is generally accepted that Mark's Gospel was written around 55-65 AD, 100 years before this).

So why was this addition made? Most probably because Mark's Gospel ends rather abruptly in v.8, "for they were afraid". Also – no resurrection appearance of Jesus, like the other Gospels. These reasons probably led to a later scribe adding an ending that they thought to be appropriate, drawing on the resurrection themes in the other Gospels.

Why then does Mark's Gospel end so abruptly? Possibly – wanted to leave the ending open-ended. But this seems unusual for Mark's style. Another possibility, he died before he could finish it. Or, there was an original ending, but it got lost. We will never know!

### **Conclusion**

So what does this all mean for us? Can we trust the rest of the NT, if there are doubts concerning this text? Absolutely – God has preserved his Word for us, can trust it! The many thousands of manuscripts that all faithfully testify to the same NT text should give us great encouragement to the truth of what we have in our Bibles.

Even though there are issues with this last section of Mark, and because of these issues, we should not consider it as the Word of God (this is the reason that I have not preached on it), there is nothing in it that is contrary to the rest of Scripture. Just need to bear all this in mind when we approach God's Word.