

Textual Criticism and Mark 16:9-20

Intro: As Christians we can have great faith in the integrity of the transmission of the Scriptures from ancient times until now. A whole field of biblical science has arisen around this issue called textual criticism. Simply put, the textual critic's job is to study the various copies of the Greek and Hebrew text with their variations and seek to determine from them, as best one can tell, what was the reading of the original autographs (which of course no longer exist). Their work is very important because it provides an original language text of the Scriptures which can then be translated into other languages like modern English.

Don't let the word criticism bother you. These scholars are not unbelievers of the Scriptures; in fact they strongly believe in them and that's why they want to make sure that our modern translations are based on the best representative of the original autographs.

However, occasionally as they do their work, they come across some texts that are problematic; and need special consideration. One of them is the ending of the Gospel of Mark in Mk. 16:9-20.

What you may see in your modern English versions

If you turn to Mark 16 in your Bible, you may see, if you are using a modern English translation, some kind of marginal note expressing some questions about whether the text was a part of the original autograph of Mark.

NASV

Mk. 16:9-20 are put in brackets and a marginal note says, "some of the oldest mss. do not contain v. 9-20."

Later after v. 20, there is a second text that is included that you likely have not heard used:

"And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation." (Short ending)

That text is also put in brackets with a marginal note: "A few later mss. and versions contain this paragraph, usually after v. 8."

NKJV

At end of v. 20 the translation contains this footnote: *"Verses 9-20 are bracketed in NU text as not original. They are lacking in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, though nearly all other manuscripts of Mark contain them."*

NU stands for two modern critical Greek texts: 26th version of by Nestle-Aland and the text of the United Bible Societies.

There is also what is called the Majority text which gives preference to the reading that is found in the most manuscripts without other considerations. The NKJV is based on this majority text.

NIV (Zondervan Archaeological Study Bible edition)

"The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20."

(I should here urge to remember that there is a difference between marginal notes that reflect variants in the ancient text and study notes or commentary which seeks to explain the meaning of the text or give what the editor thinks is helpful information.)

What this information mean to us as readers

First it is an acknowledgement that not every copy of every Greek manuscript or their translations is in perfect agreement.

In this case there are actually four distinct "endings" to the Gospel of Mark found in various manuscripts (Metzger's summary)

First there the manuscripts that end the Gospel of Mark at v. 8 with no additions (i.e. 9-20 is missing). These include Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus plus a number of other translated texts. In addition, there are numerous texts that have the reading in Mk. 16:9-20; but indicate in some way that the text is questionable or spurious.

Second, there is another reading that combines the traditional ending of Mark 16:9-20 along with the shorter ending we read earlier placed before it.

Third, there is the traditional ending of our present versions reading as it does in our English versions.

Fourth, there is one reading that exists today that adds to Mk. 16:9-20 another paragraph after v. 14 in which the apostle's respond to Jesus' rebuke. It reads: *"And they excused themselves, saying, "This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits [or, does not allow what lies under the unclean spirits to understand the truth and power of God]. Therefore reveal thy righteousness now"—thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, "The term of years of Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was delivered over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more, in order that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven."*

Second it compels us to at least think about the fact that these differences exist; and how they can be explained.

Also it sets forth the need to try to determine what the original text of Mark actually did say.

The work of the textual scholars seek to find a reasonable explanation for the variations, while seeking to know the original reading was.

How can these differences be explained?

One view is that the Gospel of Mark originally ended at Mk. 16:8.

This view suggests that v. 8 is an adequate ending to the gospel; and it was not necessary for Mark to say more. It was not necessary for Mark to record post-resurrection appearances, since he has recorded Jesus promise to appear to the disciples in Galilee and now the angel confirms that this will happen. The ladies depart in fear and wonder. Some theorize that Mark may have intended to write more; and what we have is what the original recipients received up to that point as he writes Peter's memoirs.

Another view is that Mark did write more; but early in the history of the transmission process, the final page was lost or damaged. Consequently efforts were made to "fill in the gap."

Because the information was missing, some scribes simply left a blank in their manuscript awaiting the restoration of the text when presumably a complete or uncorrupted copy was found. This might explain the "empty space" found in some ancient manuscripts at Mk. 16:8.

Because the information was missing, some scribe created a brief ending to summarize the message of the other gospels such as the one found in a few manuscripts. (The so-called "short ending.") It attempts to summarize the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and the commission to the apostles to preach the gospel to the whole creation. This could explain the alternative short reading that appears in some manuscripts, mostly with 16:9-20 also.

Because the information was missing, another author created an ending based on information in the other gospels. Thus we have the reading in Mark 16:9-20 which essentially echoes in different terms the message of the other gospels; but not necessarily composed by Mark himself..

A third view is that Mark 16:9-20 is Mark's creation and was a part of the gospel from the beginning.

Like the other gospels it was necessary for Mark to give examples of Jesus' appearance to His disciples.

Which solution makes the most sense? (It is a complex question and scholars differ in their conclusions.)

Virtually all textual scholars would agree that the paragraph recording an additional conversation between Jesus and His apostles after v. 14 was not a part of Mark's original gospel.

This paragraph is found in only one existing manuscript today though it was known by the ancient preacher Jerome.

The conversation recorded between Jesus and the apostles uses language and themes that are foreign to Mark's gospel.

Most readers would sense immediately that it is not the original reading and has what Metzger would call "an apocryphal flavor."

It would seem unlikely that the short ending would be the proper ending of Mark's gospel.

This reading is found by itself in only one Italian manuscript.

Otherwise it is included before the longer traditional reading.

It is much harder to choose between the final two alternatives; and scholars are divided on whether Mark. 16:9-20 was an original part of Mark's gospel or not. Let's take a quick look at their reasoning.

Those who consider Mark 16:9-20 a later addition contend that the addition is not totally compatible with the earlier material in various ways and indicates the composition by another writer who composes this ending afterward. (The basis?)

Though an argument from silence, they point out that two prolific writers Origen and Clement of Alexandria show no knowledge of the existence of these verses. Two other writers, Eusebius and Jerome, know of the verses but affirm that the passage was absent from almost all the manuscripts known to them.

In terms of internal evidence they affirm that the passage contains a number of words and expressions not found elsewhere in Mark's gospel, thus differing in both vocabulary and style.

There is the abrupt change in subject from the women to Jesus as the subject of the narrative is awkward.

The expression "after he had appeared" and the use of the word "first" would not be compatible as a continuation of what has been previously stated. These would add weight to the idea that it was added later.

Finally they point out that in many of the manuscripts where this text is found there are indicators by the scribes suggesting that it was not found in the oldest manuscripts or markings are present that would suggest that it is of questionable origin.

And so many highly respected textual critics are of the opinion that Mark did not write this section, but that it was added before the end of the second century and was given canonical status. (They have no objection to the material itself.)

Those who consider Mark 16:9-20 original add a couple of other important facts to support their case.

The text is quoted very early in church history.

For example a harmony of the gospels called the Diatessaron by Tatian includes Mark 16:9-20.

Some church writers of the second century like Irenaeus know of Mk. 16:9-20 and appeal to it authoritatively. In his work *Against Heresies* he wrote: "Also, towards the conclusion of his Gospel, Mark says: 'So then, after the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God'" (3.10.5).

Also quoted by Tertullian and Cyprian in the third century before the composition of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus.

The lack of its presence in a few manuscripts may be due to a lost or destroyed page in an early copy that resulted in the short version created to fill the void.

To counter the arguments of the other point of view they maintain that arguments from vocabulary and style are subjective; and can often be made about texts where there is clearly not two writers.

Also the ending of Mk. 16:9-20 is compatible with the earlier section in this way. Mark first gives evidence for the empty tomb (Mk. 16:1-8); and then records three instances of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances starting with v. 9.

Also they suggest that weight should be given to translations that pre-existed Sinaiticus and Vaticanus that had this verse. They also point out that Alexandrinus, a manuscript also highly regarded from the 5th century has the longer ending.

How we should react to this information

First we should not believe that there is some sinister plot or conspiracy to remove an important part of the word of God from Scripture.

Though we may not always agree with our religious friends, we can give them credit for being sincere and remember that these decisions involve people who would be quite agreed with us doctrinally.

Second we should not lose faith that the word of God has been adequately preserved.

It has; and the discussion about Mark 16 is just an indication of how carefully textual scholars are working to ensure the integrity of the text.

Third our faith in the truth of the resurrection, baptism, spiritual gifts, etc should not be shaken if these verses were not Marcan in origin. Third nothing we believe is dependent solely on a text in Mark 16:9-20.

We could show that everything Mark 16 teaches could be established by the use of other unquestionable texts.

This includes the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the great commission, the ascension, the confirmation of the word by miraculous spiritual gifts.

Fourth we can formulate an opinion about which option above is correct and grant the same to others.

If someone felt upon examining the evidence that Mark 16:9-20 was not originally a part of Mark's gospel and therefore had doubts about its use, I would grant him that right.
I would not hesitate to use Mark 16:9ff since it is a part of the NT canon; and speaks the truth.

Conclusion: Be aware of this kind of thing as you read commentaries and talk to people.