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**Trinitarian** Bible Society

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# Should the Last Twelve Verses of Mark 16 be in your Bible?

In the Revised Version of 1881 a space is left between the end of the 8th verse of Mark 16 and the beginning of verse 9, and a marginal note reads: 'The two oldest Greek manuscripts, and some other authorities omit from verse 9 to the end. Some other authorities have a different ending to the Gospel!'. Many more recent versions have a similar note, and as a result many modern readers are inclined to assume that these verses are spurious.

Since the time of Griesbach's second edition of the New Testament (1806) it has been increasingly the fashion for Biblical scholars to question the genuineness of Mark 16.9–20. It has been alleged that the testimony of the Greek manuscripts and early Christian writers makes it impossible to regard these verses as Mark's. It has also been argued that difference of vocabulary and style lead to the same conclusion.

It is suggested that the last portion of the Gospel was lost at an early date and that the present ending was added by a later hand. Before Griesbach, scholars left these verses in the text and defended their genuineness, e.g. Mill 1707, Bengel 1734, Wetstein 1751 and Alter 1787. Birch 1788 raised the question but retained the verses in his text; Matthaei 1788 strenuously defended them.

Griesbach suggested that before the end of the second century the present termination was added by an unknown writer and that a whole family of manuscripts descended from this source. Other copies existed, according to Griesbach, without these verses and gave rise to the group of manuscripts in which the Gospel ends with the words 'for they were afraid'. In his opinion only these copies represented the authentic text.

Hug 1808 and Scholz 1830 both defended the genuineness of the verses rejected by Griesbach. Lachmann adopted the principle of relying upon a small group of the most ancient manuscripts (notwithstanding the unsatisfactory character of these witnesses),

and disregarding all the later evidence. His text appeared in 1842 without the disputed verses because the verses were not to be found in Codex Vaticanus and a few other ancient copies. He was followed by Tischendorf, Tregelles and Dean Alford. Tregelles would not dispute the inspiration of the verses, but denied that they were part of the original Gospel—an impossible position.

Archbishop Thompson in his *Bible Dictionary*, T. S. Green in his *Developed Criticism*, Prof. Norton in his *Genuineness of the Gospels*, Prof. Westcott in his *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels*, and Meyer in his *Critical Commentary* all deny the genuineness of these verses. Their example has been followed by many twentieth-century scholars, and their hostile verdict has been accepted without question by many who profess to be evangelical Christians with a reverent regard for the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures.

A re-examination of the evidence demonstrates that their verdict is wrong and that the disputed verses are abundantly entitled to their place in the Gospel according to Mark. It is evident that some copyist of the third century left a copy of Mark unfinished and that the imperfect copy became the source of the small number of defective copies which have been preserved to our times. The vast majority of the manuscripts contain the verses in question.

## Testimony of early Christian writers

Apart from a few fragments, our oldest manuscripts are of the fourth century, but the writings of a hundred or more writers of a much earlier period are available to testify to the contents of copies of the New Testament much earlier than any Greek manuscripts we now possess. We have comparatively few copies of the New Testament from the period AD 300–600, but about two hundred writers of that period quote from manuscripts then in existence but which have not survived.

It is true that many of these writers quote loosely and from memory, but even a very general allusion to these verses would be sufficient proof that the ancient writer was familiar with the words and found them in copies then in use. Such allusions are to be found:

- in the writings of Papias AD 100
- Justin Martyr AD 151 quotes the **last** verse within fifty years of the death of the last Apostles
- Irenaeus quotes and comments on verse 19 in AD 180
- Hippolytus quotes verses 17 and 18 in the period AD 190–227

- Vincentius quoted verses 17 and 18 at the Seventh Council of Carthage, AD 256, in the presence of eighty-seven African Bishops
- about 150 years later Augustine quoted the same passage
- the third century 'Gospel of Nicodemus' contains verses 15, 16, 17, 18
- the 'Apostolical Constitutions' of the third or fourth century quote verse 16 as it stands in the Received Text
- Eusebius, AD 325, was familiar with the last twelve verses
- the Homily of Aphraates, AD 337, quotes verses 16, 17, 18
- Ambrose, Archbishop of Milan, AD 374–97, quotes verses 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20
- Chrysostom, AD 400, quotes verses 19 and 20 and adds 'This is the end of the Gospel'
- Jerome, AD 331–420, retains the disputed passage
- Nestorius the heretic quotes verse 20
- Cyril of Alexandria accepts the quotation and comments on it some time before AD 430
- Victor of Antioch, AD 425, bears emphatic testimony to the genuineness of this passage

These authorities belong to every part of the ancient church and several of them are of more ancient date than our oldest manuscripts.

Modern critics quote Gregory of Nyssa, Hesychius, Severus of Antioch, Eusebius, Victor of Antioch and Jerome as hostile to Mark 16.9–20. But Gregory and Severus merely quote the words of Hesychius; Victor quotes Eusebius and **refutes him**; and Jerome only **translates** but does not approve the words of Eusebius. We are thus left with Eusebius only, and an examination of his testimony indicates that he did not deny that the disputed words were in many manuscripts of his time. Eusebius mentioned that because of apparent discrepancies between the concluding portions of the Gospels, some people were inclined to exclude the final verse of Mark. Victor clearly states that the words were to be found in the Palestinian copy of Mark.

## Testimony of the Ancient Versions

The New Testament was translated at a very early period into Syriac, Latin, Gothic, Egyptian, etc. Some of these translations were made from Greek copies more ancient than any we now possess. They can therefore tell us what scholars found in their New

Testament before the time of our oldest manuscripts. In the Peshito Syriac of the second century, the Curetonian Syriac of the third century, the Philoxenian Syriac of the fifth century, Jerome's Latin of the fourth, the Old Latin of the second, the Gothic of the fourth, the Egyptian of the fourth or fifth, the Thebaic of the third, some copies of the Armenian of the fifth century—in all these ancient translations we have evidence that the translators found the disputed verses included in the Greek copies available to them. Most of those ancient translations were made long before the Vatican and Sinai copies were written. The Greek copies used by the translators in the second and third centuries contained the last twelve verses, while the Greek copies used by the Vatican and Sinai copyists in the fourth century were incomplete.

## Testimony of the Greek Manuscripts

The great majority of the manuscripts contain the disputed words, but two very ancient copies omit them, namely Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, both of the fourth century. A nineteenth-century scholar examined twenty ancient uncial manuscripts and about six hundred cursives and found only these two at variance with the Received Text.

Codex Alexandrinus and Codex C, perhaps fifty years later than Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, contain these verses. Codex Bezae (D), often in agreement with the two defective manuscripts, parts company with them here and includes the verses. It is clear that the Sinai and Vatican manuscripts exhibit a mutilated text in this place, as they do in many other passages.

These two manuscripts, though ancient, are in many respects defective and untrustworthy, carelessly written with numerous omissions. The Vatican Manuscript in the Gospels alone omits words and clauses nearly one thousand five hundred times; the largest proportion of these is found in Mark. Codex Sinaiticus abounds with 'errors of the eye and pen, to an extent not unparalleled, but happily unusual in documents of first-rate importance'.<sup>1</sup> These two documents exhibit signs of a common origin in an earlier defective copy.

## False Witnesses

The Vatican copy stops short at the end of verse 8, but the copyist left a blank space sufficient to accommodate the missing verses. It seems likely that the copyist knew that there was a portion missing in the copy before him.

In the Sinai copy the double page containing the end of Mark and beginning of Luke was removed at an early date and replaced with the four sides rewritten to exclude

Mark 16.9–20. By slightly increasing the size of the letters and spaces the writer was able to extend his shortened version to the top of the column preceding Luke 1. He filled in the remainder of his last line with an ornamental flourish to make sure that no addition could be made without being immediately evident. Tischendorf, the discoverer of the Sinai Codex, alleged that these pages were written by the copyist of the Vatican manuscript. The evidence does no more than indicate that few early manuscripts terminated in this way, but that the copyists themselves were conscious of the omission. These two manuscripts are shown to be false witnesses.

## Notes in Ancient Copies

The critics assure us that many ancient manuscripts contain a note stating that Mark 16.9–20 was missing from many other copies. Scholars have been found to quote their predecessors without verifying their accuracy. Thus Tregelles alleges that in twenty-five copies a note states that these verses are missing from the **most correct** copies. This statement seems to have been quoted second hand from Griesbach and Scholz 1830. Scholz misquoted Griesbach and Griesbach misquoted Wetstein 1751 and Birch.

For example, Scholz copies Griesbach, who says two manuscripts at Rome have an asterisk against Mark 16.9–20. Investigations show that there is not an asterisk, but a symbol referring the reader to a note on another page where there is a similar mark where it is plainly stated that the passage is **genuine**. There is also a note stating that the text had been collated with the ancient and approved copies at Jerusalem .

Scholz says that Codices 23, 34, 39 and 41 contain a note by Severus of Antioch that the 'more accurate copies end at verse 8'. Others have followed blindly. Codex 23 has no such note. Codex 41 has a note to the opposite effect—that the **more accurate** copies contain the verses. Codices 34 and 39 have no such note whatever. When Tischendorf, Tregelles and their successors and imitators tell us that thirty manuscripts contain a note casting doubt on Mark 16.9–20 they are repeating the mistakes of others. Most of the manuscripts referred to contain a note confirming the inclusion of the verses. The critics can furnish no evidence that the Gospel according to Mark as it left the hands of its author was imperfect or unfinished.

## The argument from style and vocabulary

Some modern scholars tell us that the characteristic features of Mark's style and vocabulary are missing from this passage. They are all entirely wrong. It is presumptuous to attempt an appraisal of a writer's style from twelve verses only, especially if the subject matter is unique and cannot be compared with earlier paragraphs on the same topic.

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For example, the first five verses of Luke are unlike anything in the rest of his Gospel; the same may be said of the first five verses of John. No critic is qualified to pass judgment on such slender evidence.

The critics imagine that the change from detailed description to loosely linked brief notices in Mark 16.9–20 indicates a change of authorship. Why? Surely a writer who could give a detailed description of a miracle could give a brief synopsis of the events following the Crucifixion, when there were many very different matters to be touched upon. Indeed it is possible to demonstrate great similarities of style between Mark 16.9–20 and Mark 1.9–20.

1) Alford points us to 16.9 *prote sabbatou* in reference to the first day of the week compared with *mias sabbaton* in 16.2. But when we compare this with Luke 6.1, 2, 5, 6, 7 and 9 we find four times *to sabbaton*, twice *ta sabbata*, twice *to sabbaton*, twice *he hemera tou sabbatou*, once *ta sabbata*. Similar cases could be multiplied at will.

It should also be noticed that *mias sabbaton* of Mark 16.2 occurs only once in each Gospel. It was a common expression in Palestine, but not so common in Rome and elsewhere. It is thought that Mark wrote his account at Rome and it seems likely that he was moved by the Spirit to use both expressions, the one elucidating the other.

2) 16.9: 'out of whom he cast seven devils'. It is pointed out that Mary Magdalene has been mentioned three times without this statement and that the writer probably took this from Luke 8.2—but the order is different in Luke, and Luke was written after Mark. Compare with John 20.7 where John mentions himself without comment as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', and then in 20. Verse 20 adds 'which also leaned on His breast at supper'. No one suggests that John 20.20 is spurious for this reason.

3) 16.10, 12 and 15: *poreuesthai* occurs three times in 16.9–20 (went, went, go) but not elsewhere in Mark. Therefore we are told this portion could not have been written by Mark. But Mark uses compound forms of this verb twenty-four times compared with a total of nineteen in Matthew, Luke and John put together. The use of the word in these three verses at the end of chapter 16 should be regarded as proof of their **genuineness**.

4) 16.15: 'to every creature'. The critics say the Greek of this is Pauline—but Paul has it only **once**, in Romans 8.22. So, why should not Mark have it only once in 16.15? The word used for 'creature' is used by Mark in 10.6 and 13.19 and not by Matthew, Luke or John. Its presence here proves the genuineness of the passage.

5) 16.19, 20: 'the Lord'. This is said to be foreign to Mark and therefore spurious. But Mark calls Him 'Jesus Christ' only **once** in Mark 1.1. The same is true of Matthew and John, but no one doubts the genuineness of these chapters because they contain a unique expression.

6) 16.19: 'was received up'. This Greek verb we are told occurs nowhere else in the Gospels. But Mark uses seventy-four verbs that are found nowhere else in the Gospels

and this is one of them. In any case Mark is describing something not previously referred to and the word is appropriate to our Lord's ascension.

**7)** The absence of *eutheds* (straightway, immediately) and *palin* (again), both frequent in Mark, is quoted as proof of spuriousness of this portion. This argument is worthless, for 'immediately' is found twelve times in chapter 1, six times in chapter 5, five times in chapters 4 and 6, etc., but **only once** in chapters 3, 8, 10 and 15 and **not once** in chapters 12, 13 and 16.

'Again' is seen six times in chapter 14, five times in chapter 10, etc., but only once in chapters 4 and 5 and **not at all** in chapters 1, 6, 9, 13 and 16. Are we to reject all these chapters because they do not contain these little words? The critics do not suggest that we should, but they insist that we reject Mark 16.9–20 on such meaningless evidence.

### **Mark's characteristic words found in these verses**

**8)** 'early' in 16.9: Mark uses this Greek word six times, much more frequently than Matthew or John. Luke never uses it.

**9)** 'Preach the Gospel' in 16.15: Mark and Matthew use the expression four times, Luke and John not at all.

'preach' (*kerussein*): Mark has this twice as often as Matthew does and three times as often as Luke does.

'gospel' (*evangelion*): Mark has this twice as often as Matthew does.

**10)** 'appeared' (*phanerousthai*) in 16.12, 14: used also by Mark in 4.22, but never by Matthew or Luke.

**11)** 'hardness of heart' in 16.14: never used by Luke or John, by Matthew only once, by Mark twice, including this verse.

**12)** 'everywhere' (*pantachou*) in 16.20: never used by Matthew or John, only once by Luke, twice by Mark including this verse. He also uses a related word in 1.45.

**13)** 'they shall recover' (*kalos exousin*) is characteristic of Mark.

**14)** 'shall be damned' (*katakrino* not *krino*): The simple form is often used by the other evangelists twenty-eight times, but never by Mark, who uses the compound form of the verb oftener than all the others. Thus it is found in 16.16 and is characteristic of Mark.

Other instances could be given but these are sufficient to demonstrate that the style and vocabulary arguments against authenticity are destitute of foundation. The evidence proves the genuineness of the passage.

## Comparison of Mark 16.9–20 and 1.9–20

There is an essential parallelism between Mark 16.9–20 and Mark 1.9–20—our Lord's manifestation to the world, victory over Satan, gifts of the Holy Spirit, preaching the Gospel, the Kingdom of God, the call to the ministry—an indication that the Holy Spirit was the Author of the ending as well as the beginning of the Gospel and that Mark was the writer of both.

## The Lectionaries

In very early times it was the practice to mark the portions of the Gospels appointed to be read in public worship. It is evident that before the Council of Nicea copies of the Gospels thus marked and including the disputed verses were in use throughout the Christian world and that these twelve verses were appointed to be read on days commemorating the resurrection and ascension. Many copies were written specially for public reading and other ordinary copies had a note added in the margin before and after each reading.

For example, in some ancient copies of Luke there is a note in the margin instructing the public reader to omit verses 43 and 44 of chapter 22 when reading the lesson for the Tuesday after 'Sexagesima' because these verses were read after Matthew 26.39 as part of the lesson for the Thursday before Easter. As a result these verses of Luke 22 are omitted from some copies. In many ancient copies marked for public reading, the Greek word for 'beginning' (*arche*) appears in shortened form in the margin or in the text in red ink where the lesson starts, and *telos* (end) in red at the end of the lesson; for example, in Mark 14.41 we read '... it is enough, the hour is come...'. Codex D of the fourth century and several others read, 'it is enough, **the end** and the hour is come...'. The marginal note *telos* 'the end' indicated that the lesson to be read should end after verse 42 but the copyist put the note into the text of verse 41 and set an example which others followed.

It is probable that an early copy of Mark included the whole of chapter 16 with a marginal note after verse 8 to indicate that the lesson for the second Sunday after Easter should end there. A copyist later misinterpreted the marginal note as meaning that the whole Gospel ended at verse 8 and that the remaining words were not part of the Gospel. This mistake was repeated in a number of copies, of which the defective manuscripts already referred to are specimens.

In Codex 24 there are very few such notes, but clearly written after verse 8 we find *telos* and again after verse 20 *telos*.

## Influence of Origen

The comment of Eusebius merely signified that some copies lacked verses 9–20, that most copies had *telos* ‘the end’ after verse 8 (as well as verse 20), and that some people were ready to solve the problem of the apparent discrepancies between Mark and the other evangelists by rejecting the lectionary in which the disputed verses are found. Eusebius probably borrowed this suggestion from the earlier writings of Origen, who was apparently familiar with defective manuscripts like the Vatican and Sinai copies.

## The Most Probable Explanation

Some ancient copies of the four-fold Gospel have the Gospels in the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark. This is found in the Codex Bezae (D) and several others. If at any time such a copy had Mark 16.8 at the foot of the last page but one, and the remaining verses on the last page, this portion would have been the most exposed to damage and loss. If *telos* were written after verse 8 in such a copy a later copyist would conclude that he had the whole Gospel before him and would leave the new copy without its proper ending.

## Summary

- 1) Although many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars reject these verses, we are more concerned to know what readers found in their New Testaments in the first, second, third and fourth centuries, and there is overwhelming evidence that the verses were included in most ancient copies.
- 2) The two most ancient copies now surviving are not trustworthy representatives of the text of Holy Scripture used in the earliest times, and in this passage they exhibit a mutilated text.
- 3) The majority of ancient copies, the majority of ancient writers and the majority of ancient translations all testify to the genuineness of these verses.
- 4) The arguments from style and vocabulary, far from leading to the rejection of these verses, actually confirm their genuineness.
- 5) There are simple and obvious explanations for the absence of these verses from some ancient copies. These include:
  - a) The ancient insertion of ‘the end’ after a lectionary reading
  - b) The ancient **order** of the Gospels, with Mark last, leaving the last page vulnerable

## Conclusion

These disputed verses are part of the inspired and Holy Word of God and should be received with reverence by the whole church of God.

In their determination to uphold the superiority of the Vatican and Sinai copies, Biblical scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have elevated these documents to a throne of supreme authority, with the result that these last twelve verses are retained in the modern versions only as a late and spurious addition to the original text.

We stand on infinitely firmer ground when we insist that the whole of Mark's Gospel—from the first verse of the first chapter to the end of verse 20 of the 16th chapter—was given by inspiration of God and is to be respected as an integral part of the divine revelation.

## Endnotes:

1. John W. Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to S. Mark* (Oxford, England: James Parker and Co., 1871), p. 98.



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