

Is Mark 16:9-20 Inspired?

By Kyle Pope

Many students of the New Testament have found themselves puzzled and confused by notes they encounter at the close of some versions of the Gospel of Mark claiming, “The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20”^[1] Are such statements accurate? Should we question the reliability or inspiration these verses? To answer these questions there are three bodies of evidence which demand our attention: Greek manuscripts, ancient translations, and the testimony of ancient writers.

I. Greek Manuscripts

The basis of this claim rests largely on two fourth century manuscripts of the Greek New Testament: Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus.



The ending of Mark
in Codex Sinaiticus

The first of these manuscripts has been listed in the Vatican library catalog since at least 1475. The second, was discovered in 1844 by the renowned Greek scholar Constantin Tischendorf in a monastery in the Sinai desert just before it was about to be burned for firewood! Both manuscripts end the Gospel of Mark at verse eight. Since the time of Tischendorf’s discovery some scholars have contended that the shorter ending of the Gospel reflects the “original reading.”

Does this prove that these verses were not original? Not at all! Both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus leave blanks at the end of Mark where the verses could be written. Sinaiticus leaves almost an entire blank column and Vaticanus leaves nearly a column and a half. This may suggest that the scribe recognized that something was missing but may not have had a copy with this section intact. To assume that these manuscripts reflect the “original reading” presumes that there is no earlier evidence for the existence of these verses. As we shall see, that is not the case.

There are over 5000 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament which have been preserved. It is often falsely asserted that Sinaiticus and Vaticanus are the “oldest manuscripts” of the New Testament. That is not true. There are many fragmentary papyri which predate both texts. One of the most significant of these is the Chester Beatty Papyri (P45). It is a second or third century manuscript of the Gospels and Acts. Unfortunately, this ancient papyri is damaged before the text of Mark 4 and after Mark 12. That means it can’t help us with regard to Mark’s ending. However, the majority of manuscripts which have survived include Mark 16:9-20. Some of these are only slightly younger than Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. For example, Codex Alexandrinus, a fifth century text presented to Charles I in 1627 by Cyril Lucar, the archbishop of Constantinople has the text. Codex Bezae (5th-6th century), acquired by the



The ending of Mark
in Codex Vaticanus

Reformer Theodore Beza from a French monastery and given to the Cambridge library in 1581 has the passage in both Greek and Latin. The text is also in Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (5th century) and Codex Washingtonensis (4th-5th century).ii[2] There are a few manuscripts which include the verses that add editorial notes that indicate that some copies did not include 16:9-20. Yet, this simply identifies the fact that an omission was present in the manuscript tradition. It proves nothing about the authority or originality of the passage. Must we reject Mark 16:9-20 in all other manuscripts because of two manuscripts which themselves may have left space for its inclusion?

II. Ancient Translations

Very early in the history of the transmission of the New Testament text, translations were made from the original Greek into various languages where the gospel spread. Undoubtedly, if a manuscript from which a text was translated, had an error or an omission in it, those would show up in the translation also. As such, some early ancient translations (just as in Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) end at verse eight. Bruce Metzger, in *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* writes that these include, “the Old Latin codex Bobiensis, the Siniatic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (written A. D. 897 and A. D. 913)” (122-23). There is also one Coptic manuscript which lacks the verses.

Metzger’s reference demands some clarification. It is true that the fourth or fifth century Old Latin codex Bobiensis does not have vss. 9-20, but it does contain a short unique ending of its own after verse eight. Does that reflect greater accuracy, or does it evidence a lack of consistency? Jerome claimed of the Latin texts of his day, that “there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies.”iii[3] This was part of what led to his work towards an “authorized version” for the Latin speaking world—the Latin Vulgate. In an age before the printing press, and photo imaging of a text, human error and alteration always played a role in the production of manuscripts. That didn’t mean God’s word was lost. Jesus said, **“heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away”** (Matthew 24:35). It simply meant that error and alteration could occur and that caution and comparison needed to be exercised in preservation of the text.

Just as the majority of Greek manuscripts preserve Mark 16:9-20, so the majority of ancient translations do as well. These include the Syriac Peshitta (2nd-3rd century); the Sahidic Coptic (2nd-3rd century); the majority of the Old Latin translations (2nd-4th century); Latin Vulgate (4th-5th century); the Gothic (4th century) – although it is damaged in the middle of verse 12; many Armenian manuscripts (5th century) and Ethiopic manuscripts (5th century). To question the originality and inspiration of Mark 16:9-20 we must disregard the efforts of centuries of scholars and translators. These were people who carefully compared and investigated the text, sincerely believing it to be the inspired word of God. Can we so easily reject their scholarship?

III. The Testimony of Ancient Writers

We have seen so far that there is clear evidence that very early on a textual issue arose concerning the ending of Mark. The question is, does this reflect a copying error or an alteration

of the original text? There is evidence as early as the fourth century that religious writers knew that some manuscripts were missing these verses. Two fourth century writers address the matter in correspondence regarding questions about how Matthew and Mark harmonize their accounts of the resurrection. Both writers mention that the answers depend upon whether the words are taken to be original or not. The first, the early fourth century historian Eusebius in his *Questions to Marinus*, writes that after verse eight “at those words, in almost all copies of the Gospel according to Mark, comes the end” (1). He further claims that “what follows” (i.e. vss. 9-20) is found “rarely in some but not in all” copies (ibid.). The second, the fourth century Biblical scholar Jerome, in a *Letter to Hedibia*, claimed that Mark 16:9-20, “is carried in few gospels, almost all the books of Greece not having this passage at the end” (Question 3). In the claims of both Eusebius and Jerome they did not emphatically reject the reliability of vss. 9-20 but simply acknowledge the fact that they were disputed in their day.

It is clear that Jerome’s words cannot be construed as a rejection of the reliability of vss. 9-20 because of his own use of the passage. In his work *Against the Pelagians*, he uses Mark 16:14 to argue that even the Apostles showed unbelief and hardness of heart (II.15). He even included the verses in his own Latin Vulgate translation. This is significant because Jerome stated in a *Letter to Marcella* that because of the unreliable form of the Latin texts, “I have wished to recall them to the Greek original from whence none deny, they have been translated” (27.1). Did Jerome find additional Greek texts which had Mark 16:9-20, or did he recognize that those which lacked it were flawed?

Overwhelmingly the evidence from the testimony of ancient writers falls in support of the antiquity and originality of the passage. Not only do contemporaries of Jerome and Eusebius use the verses as authoritative but writers which predate Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and the translations quote the passage! The earliest undisputed example of this is found in the second century writings of Irenaeus. In his work *Against Heresies*, he writes, “at the end of the Gospel, Mark says: ‘So then, after the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God’” (III.10.5). Here Irenaeus not only quotes verse 19, but claims that this comes at the end of the Gospel. How can we question the antiquity and originality of this text if someone barely a generation after the composition of the New Testament quotes it?

In addition to this, Tatian, also writing in the second century, in his harmony of the Gospels called the *Diatessaron*, includes the passage. Many early writers make reference to the Lord’s words in Mark 16:18 regarding drinking poison and it not hurting the Christian. Among these are Papias (ca. 110) from Eusebius’, *Ecclesiastical History* III.39; Tertullian (ca. 212) in his *Scorpiace* 15; and Hippolytus (ca. 230) in his *Apostolic Tradition* 36.1. The record of the Seventh Council of Carthage (ca. 258) under Cyprian cites a man in attendance named Vincentius of Thibarais who made reference to the Lord’s “divine precept commanded to His apostles, saying, ‘Go ye, lay on hands in my name, expel demons,’” a paraphrase of Mark 16:17. Vincentius then goes on to quote Matthew 28:19, a parallel to the Great Commission of Mark 16:16.

While the question of Mark’s ending may have been known in the fourth century, most understood this text to be inspired and unquestioned. Both Ambrose (ca. 337-397) and Augustine (ca. 354-430) frequently quoted from Mark 16:9-20. Augustine, in his *Harmony of the Gospels*,

comments extensively on Mark 16:12 (III. 24.69). This is particularly significant because of the great emphasis he places on the value of the Greek text in his writings. In his work *On Christian Doctrine*, he writes, “As to the books of the New Testament, again, if any perplexity arises from the diversities of the Latin texts, we must of course yield to the Greek, especially those that are found in the churches of greater learning and research” (II.15, 22). Was Augustine familiar with Greek texts which had Mark 16:9-20 which were not known to Eusebius or Jerome? During this same time John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) referred to Mark 16:9 in his *Homily 38 on First Corinthians* (5; 1 Corinthians 15:8). And finally, Macarius Magnes (ca. 400) in his *Apocriticus* in answering challenges made by pagans to specific Scriptures directly addressed objections to Mark 16:17-18 (III.16 and 24). By the fifth century onward, citations from this passage become too numerous to even mention.

Conclusion

There is no question that at some point in the early history of copying and transcribing the text of Mark an issue arose regarding Mark 16:9-20 and its inclusion in the text. This influenced copies and translations which came after it. Even so, Irenaeus quotes the text little more than a generation after the close of the New Testament canon, claiming that it was “at the end of the Gospel.” This together with the overwhelming evidence of manuscripts, translations, and ancient testimony leaves no doubt that these words were in the original text of Mark as inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16).

i[1] The New International Version inserts this note in the body of the text before its translation of verses 9-20. As we demonstrate in this article, this statement assumes a great deal and fails to express all the evidence at our disposal.

ii[2] We should note that while Washingtonensis does have vss. 9-20, it also adds additional material. While that reflects alteration, its inclusion of the verses provides witness to their acceptance and existence.

iii[3] From *Preface to the Four Gospels*, written to Pope Damasus in association with his production of the Latin Vulgate.