

# The Ending of Mark's gospel

Where does Mark's gospel end?

- Does it end at v8? (which may seem to us like a strange place to end it – we may want it to finish, as the other three gospels do, on a more positive note)
- Or does it end at v20? (but then what about the comment we have in our Bibles “Most early manuscripts omit Mark 16:9-20”)

So do we consider this longer ending (“v9-20”) as part of Mark and the Scripture he wrote, or not?

It seems to me, that the evidence strongly points to the fact that Mark **did not** write v9-20. Therefore we are best not to consider these verses as part of Mark's gospel.

The following are the reasons why, but before going through them, it may be helpful to remember the process of how the Bible has come to us:

- The Bible writers wrote their books/letters, inspired by the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-26, 2 Tim 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21).
- Those books were very soon recognised to be authoritative as God's Word to his people, just as the Old Testament was (so, for example, see what Peter said of his own letter and those of Paul's: 2 Peter 1:12-21 and 3:15-16).
- These books and letters were carefully copied lots and lots, and continued to be copied down the centuries. So whilst the original inspired documents have long since been lost, what was written down originally has come down to us because of remarkably careful and faithful copying.
- Inevitably, in making copies, some scribes will have made changes to the text. However, it needs to be stressed that, because so many copies have been written over time you can readily spot the differences and so keep track of what was original, and what wasn't. So just to encourage you: there are over 24,000 copies we have from the first century up until the invention of the printing press. From this scholars say that we can be certain that 99.5% of what we have in our Bibles, was what was written by the original, inspired, Bible writers.
- Of the other 0.5% of where we therefore have different copies saying different things, two things need to be remembered:
  - (1) Where this happens, the translators and printers are careful to make it clear in our Bibles by the footnotes or marks in the text. It is not that these things are concealed – we are told where they occur.
  - (2) Most only very small. And none of these differences affect the major doctrines of our faith.

The question over the ending of Mark falls into this latter category: ie we have different versions – and so the translators/printers have flagged that for us.

With that in mind, here are the reasons why I don't think Mark wrote v9-20:

**(1) The closest copies we have to Mark's original gospel end at v8**

As the translators have highlighted in our Bibles: the earliest copies simply don't have v9-20.

This is significant because: if it was the case that the earliest copies *did* have v9-20, but some later ones didn't, the natural conclusion would be to think that the longer version was original and those later shorter copies had lost the ending somehow.

But it is actually the other way round. The earliest copies *don't* have v9-20, but some later copies do. So the natural conclusion is to think that the shorter version was original and those later copies have an added ending.

**(2) Early church scholars believed it had been added**

A number of early church writers who were involved in identifying, translating and copying the New Testament comment negatively on it. Eg:

- Eusebius (4<sup>th</sup> century) remarked that "accurate" copies of Mark's gospel ended at v8, adding that v9-20 were missing from "almost all manuscripts".
- A number of copies that DO have v's9-20 have the verses marked by asterisks or 'obeli' which were conventional signs used by scribes to mark off questionable additions to the text.

**(3) There are actually a number of different endings**

It isn't just a choice of ending at v8 or have the longer ending. There are actually quite a few different endings.

- Some copies: have a shorter ending:  
*"And they reported all the instructions briefly to Peter's companions. Afterwards Jesus himself, through them, sent forth from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen."*
- Some copies: have a shorter ending with bits of the longer ending.
- Some copies: an even longer ending with an extra paragraph in between v14 and 15.

Apart from the problem of which ending you actually go with – the whole caboodle just seems to suggest that all these endings were attempts to either "finish Mark off properly", or to add information from or about the early church. Either way – it seems very unlikely Mark wrote them.

#### **(4) The endings are “not very Mark”**

V9-20 has the feel of a summary gained from other sources (eg Luke and John and Acts). It has something of a “bolted on” feel to it.

So a couple of examples:

- V9: Mary Magdalen re-introduced. If Mark had written this – why didn't he say this about Mary when he first introduced here in 15:40.
- V8 and v10 seem to grate against each other. V8 says “they didn't say anything to anyone” but that is then smoothed over in v10.  
(In fact, interestingly, some copies which have v9-20 have chopped off words in v8 in order to make the whole thing read more easily).

More significantly, if you look at the way Mark writes and compare the kinds of Greek words he uses, and the kinds of Greek found in the longer ending – there are a lot of differences. It just doesn't seem like he wrote it. It seems a lot more second-hand.

#### **(5) A majority among scholars, commentators & trusted Bible teachers**

Of course scholars and preachers can get things spectacularly wrong.

But when the significant majority of Greek and New Testament scholars are saying “We don't think Mark wrote this” – then that is worth something.

Some final comments:

#### **Do we lose anything by not preaching on v9-20?**

I would argue no. Everything that has significance in the longer ending – can be found elsewhere in the Bible. So:

- Jesus appearing to Mary and the two on the road to Emmaus
- Jesus appearing to the apostles and their initial unbelief
- The great commission to go and preach the gospel
- The authentication of the apostles through amazing signs and wonders (including the fact that Paul gets bitten by a snake but doesn't die!)
- The ascension of Jesus

These can all be found in Matthew, Luke, John and Acts. Given the doubts over the origin of v9-20, it seems to me, safest to preach on these sorts of truths from where we find them elsewhere in the Bible.

## Are we wrong to preach from v9-20?

My thoughts would probably be “Why would you want to?” If there is doubt over whether they are words the Holy Spirit inspired through Mark, why not just leave them – especially given the above and that we they don’t teach anything major that we don’t find elsewhere.

Certainly, I would not want to consider these verses by themselves as “authoritative” to teach biblical truth. Indeed, some churches have gone astray using them. An example of this would be the extreme “Church of God with Signs Following” Pentecostal churches in the US, where they deliberately practice snake handling and drink poison in their services (because of 16:18). You may have heard of deaths that have happened in these churches over the years (including a pastor in 2015).

## What matters most?

I guess one question is always worth asking is: am I willing to accept that God may not have inspired these verses? In other words, *WE* might want the happier/more exciting/more fulfilling ending. But the key question is always: do we go with what *we want* the Bible to say, or go with what it actually *does* say? This is certainly not always easy. There will be plenty of times we will be tempted, very subtly, to:

- read something and think “I wish it didn’t say that” and so to just ignore or gloss over it. Or,
- read something and think “I wish it said this” and so be tempted to make it say something we want it to say.

The thing we always need to remind ourselves is that what matters most is doing our best to take God at his word, and to be faithful to that – not adding to it, or taking away from it (Rev 22:18-19).

## In summary

It seems to me that v9-20 were not written by Mark, and were therefore not part of the inspired Scripture he wrote. Either Mark intended to stop his gospel deliberately at v8. Or his original ending has been lost. Either way, in God’s providence, this is what we have from Mark.

Should we consider v9-20 to be inspired Scripture even though Mark didn’t write it? Well, given that it doesn’t surface until after the apostles (probably sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century) in my mind I think it best to err on the side of caution and stop at v8.

If you want to chat more about any of this – please do give me a shout. It would be great to talk further.