

Mark 16:8 is a fitting ending to the Gospel.' Critically discuss this statement.

Introduction

The Gospel of Mark tells us many interesting things about the ministry of Jesus Christ including his death and his empty tomb with a view to helping us discover him as the saviour from sin and way to eternal life and the Son of God.

The Gospel stops with the story of Jesus' death by crucifixion and men in white announcing to women who visited his tomb that he had risen from the dead. It ends with Mark 16:8, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (NIV).

Many ideas about why Mark ended at 16:8 are as good as each other.

Alfred Loisy thought that Mark ended with saying nobody told about the empty tomb for his gospel was the first to even mention it. Could it be that Mark just stopped for he was afraid of going too far with fabrication?

If you can assume that the ending was lost or assume that it was removed for it debunked the resurrection or contradicted what the other gospels were saying then you can. Considering that religions typically do edit out stuff to make their case look stronger you could say the disappearance must have been about hiding something. If the gospel had something like, "The women never spoke about it not even until this day. The disciples asked them about the tomb and they said they knew nothing. Then Peter and John went to the tomb and found nobody there but when they left the tomb two men in white came to them and said, Jesus is risen and you must go to Galilee to see him. The apostles went to Galilee and there they saw Jesus who sent them out into the world to preach the good news until he comes again" is it any wonder it would have been cut out?

If Mark was making up the story he could have invented the visit of the women to the tomb and their silence as an "explanation" for why nobody had heard of this empty tomb before. Or was his purpose to have angels in white or men in white to announce the resurrection? Was that all the earliest believers had: alleged men or angels from God saying Jesus rose?

When Mark says the women told nobody we don't know if he means they never told so we cannot consider his story evidence for the resurrection. Nor can we consider the women to be witnesses. Those who say women were never witnesses in those days should take that line. So there is no reason to think Mark presents any indication that Jesus really rose. In a secular account or miraculous account we cannot treat the absence of evidence for something as evidence that it happened. This is even more true in an account of the miraculous. Credulity means believing in magic or miracles when there are gaps in the evidence that may mean a natural explanation is enough.

Problem of the Ending

It seems odd that a gospel would end with simply saying the women were afraid seemingly in mid-sentence. Also, it gives us a gospel without resurrection appearances of Jesus being recorded.

It is easily suspected that the end has been lost. As Mark is considered to be scripture, it seems odd if God would let that happen.

Peter G Bolt (*Bolt, P. G. The Cross from a Distance (IVP, 2004) p. 146*) states that there is "little doubt" that Mark ended at 16:8. Most scholars agree (*Strobel, L. The Case for Easter (Zondervan, 2003) p. 75*).

I think the endings are unnecessary and suspect. Some conclude that Mark 16:8 is where Mark intended to finish the gospel because the endings are suspect. But that does not follow.

Rather than discuss the authenticity of the longer ending for Mark and the shorter ending any further then let us ask if Mark could have ended at 16:8.

Does Grammar Refute Mark 16:8 being the End?

Verse 8 ends in the original Greek with a word meaning "for" or "because". The word is *gar*. *Gar* is a more fluid word than many realise. It can be translated "after all", "in fact" or "surely" which is how according to *Why Priests? A Failed Tradition* by Garry Wills (Viking, 2013) it appears in the letter to the Hebrews. "In its various contexts, *gar* can thus be

translated as 'in fact', 'indeed', 'naturally' 'obviously'..."

Then our verse becomes "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, they were afraid after all."

The word gar can be used to end a sentence. There are examples of this happening in ancient Greek literature – Protagoras’ speech for example. However, as JP Holding reminds us, Kelly Iverson of Dallas Seminary who has studied the issue gives us instances of sentences ending like that 6. But works that end that way have not been found. It could be answered that Mark is the first example of a work that does. *Holding, J.P. JP Holding Did Mark's Gospel end at 16:8?*

<http://tektonics.org/lp/markend.html>

I don't think that is likely.

The real reason some want to rationalise the fact that the gospel was incomplete is it refutes the notion that God is author as well as Mark. Would God write a book he does not finish?

Does Mark provide other examples of “abruptness”?

It may be thought that Mark’s Gospel can be shown to prepare us for a sudden end. For example, the gospel begins virtually with Jesus’ baptism late on in his life. His earlier life is not mentioned. The gospel uses “jolts” to put its message across and for dramatic effect and to force us to go to the Holy Spirit, who Jesus promises to give in a baptism of spirit and fire, for the rest of the story.

But that was merely Mark's style. After the abrupt bits there was text. It defies logic to argue that this abruptness explains the sudden ending.

“The form of the Gospel of Mark is fast-paced and often abrupt” (*Carter, J. W. A Perspective on the Distinctiveness of Mark's Gospel*

www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/CarterJ07.html.)

On one occasion Jesus was told his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him (Mark 3:34). He said it was those who obeyed the word of God who were his mother and brothers and sisters. Mark makes no effort to explain this or to say how Jesus explained it. He just leaves us in a state of shock to figure it out for ourselves.

Mark asserted at the start of the gospel that Jesus was the Son of God. Rather than give us the evidence and then conclude that Jesus was the Son of God he does the reverse. This incredible confidence is a device he uses to indicate that Jesus’ disciples had better evidence than any gospel could ever convey. That is a typical trick used by charlatans, "Oh we know something you don't."

Some then reason, "Mark uses sudden endings to make us ask ourselves questions. He ends his gospel suddenly to confront us with the biggest question of all which is, “Do I sense the risen Jesus being with me and do I open my heart to him to proclaim his salvation without fear restraining me?”" That is total rubbish. Mark never strives to give people a personal relationship with Jesus. The gospel is about God and God's kingdom.

It is argued that the gospel gives us evidence for the resurrection in the form of the empty tomb, the message from the risen Jesus given by a messenger and the promise of appearances (*Strobel, L. The Case for Easter p. 75*). It seems that the prediction of appearances of Jesus would not have been mentioned if they had not happened. It appears that despite the gospel seeming to have a sudden end, enough evidence was given to justify belief in the resurrection. Or does it? I can predict that people will see Elvis Presley. My being right does not mean that the visions are real.

Why End with the Women’s Fear?

If the abrupt ending really was the ending then why end there?

The angel gave the women a message from Jesus to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to meet the risen Jesus. Mark tells us that the women carried this message away with them and did not mention it to anyone. It is said that Mark wants us to feel, “They didn’t give the message so it is our duty to embrace the message and share it. We must ask the world to meet Jesus.” This is not to be understood as a denial that the women did deliver the message eventually. That would make Mark contradict the other gospels. And it is unnecessary to assume that. But the problem is that Mark never visualised the resurrection in terms of a spiritual relationship with Jesus.

The women did not keep silent for long. If they hadn’t spoken Mark wouldn’t have their story to record for us. How does

this square with what we are told in Young's Literal Translation "For they were afraid (efobounto gar). Imperfect tense. The continued fear explains their continued silence." 9. I think the answer is that the silence was kept up for a while.

We do not know from Mark if the women said anything later on. Mark chooses not to tell us that they did. Why? It leaves us realising that the story needs to be told (*The Cross from a Distance* p. 152). The implication being that it is up to us who experienced the risen Jesus to tell. The women were afraid. If we experience Jesus we will not be afraid to tell the world that it can be saved through his death and that he is alive to day to be its friend and rock.

William Lane Craig wrote that Mark loves to stress terror and awe when God shows his presence to people. He wrote, "this reaction of the women – of fleeing with fear and trembling, and saying nothing to anyone because they were afraid – is all part of Mark's literary and theological style" -*The Case for Easter* p. 48

I agree. Mark wished to rouse a sense of shock in us when he wrote that Jesus cried that God had forsaken him. He did not mention that Jesus' cry was made up of the start of a psalm that was about hope.

Were the women afraid of getting into trouble with the authorities if they said anything? John Gill wrote that the women were "were afraid to tell any but the disciples of these things, for fear of the Jews; lest they should be thought to have stolen the body of Christ, and so be taken up on that account, and punished" (*Mark 16:8*, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/mark-16-8.html?>). I'm glad Gill wrote that for it is said the women found the tomb open. If the body was still inside it they could have taken it and hid it and lied that Jesus rose to cover up their crime. Jesus would have rotted rapidly so if the body turned up nobody would have known for sure it was him.

Or were they afraid because they had an astounding and supernatural experience at the tomb wherein they saw angels telling them that Jesus rose from the dead? Some say this is a better understanding. It is said to be supported in the original Greek which speaks of *tromov kai ekstasiv*, trembling and ecstasy (*Young's Literal Translation*, <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Bible.show/sVerseID/24882/eVerseID/24882/RTD/rwpnt/version/YLT>). But those words do not necessarily imply the supernatural. They could have had a self-induced charismatic or mystical experience so nothing much should be read into it.

Mark wants to excite our curiosity. This makes us ask, then how do we know Jesus rose? He tells us nothing about what happened after Jesus rose from the dead. He merely says that Jesus rose from the dead and two men in white, presumably angels, announced this to the women. Believers keep saying he wants the answer to the question to be, "I have experienced the redemptive power of the risen saviour and that is how I know that he is risen". In reality, he was just like the miracle-mongers of the day. He was out to give spiritual thrills and awaken an unhealthy fascination with magic and the supernatural.

It must be admitted that the reasons for Mark ending there do not seem very convincing.

Does the 16:8 Ending Sidestep the Resurrection?

David Edwards (*Edwards, D. and Stott, J., Essentials Hodder & Stoughton, 1990 p. 209*) states that it is wrong to say Mark stopped at 16:8 and he never knew of any resurrection appearances because his gospel has it predicted that the risen Jesus will appear in Galilee. But a prediction does not amount to knowing of any resurrection appearances. My view is that Mark, though he knew of no other gospels, could have wished to leave it to them to say what happened next. But it is more likely that the end of Mark really is missing. The reason the gospels agree so well to the burial but there are problems in the subsequent event reporting in the four different gospels is that the end of Mark really was missing. Mark was the one who needed to give them the template of the story and it never happened which is why the other resurrection accounts steer off in different and contradictory directions.

What about the argument, "Mark reported that the tomb was empty, that a man who seems to be an angel said Jesus was risen and that he had communicated a desire to meet some his followers. The essentials for belief in the resurrection are there, the empty tomb, Jesus being alive and the appearances are predicted. Mark would not have mentioned the predictions if they had not been fulfilled." That is speculation for nobody really knows what Mark would have written after.

It is said that Mark would not have seen the resurrection as unimportant but as of supreme significance. Theorising Mark ended at 16:8 suggests that he could have seen it as insignificant. It is objected that Mark would not have downgraded the resurrection of Jesus. Why? They say it is because his gospel speaks of the Son of Man, Jesus, promising to return in glory. But that surely means that Jesus' glorification matters not his resurrection as such! The contortions of logic we get from Christian scholars is alarming.

One reason for the seemingly sudden end might have been to bring glory to the humanity and ordinariness of Jesus Christ as recorded in the gospel. Perhaps Mark wants us to feel incomplete and unsatisfied so that our thirst for knowledge of Jesus will take us back to the start of the gospel to read it all again. This really implies that the example created by the living Jesus matters more than him now. It is as if his resurrection was to his benefit and not ours.

The way Mark ends leaves us with only a man in white to testify that Jesus rose. The implication is that testimony sent from God is enough. If each Christian needs to be indwelt by the risen Christ and be vitalised by this presence, then Mark is simply mentioning the angel to remind us that God does not lie or deceive. Christians say we must trust the Holy Spirit when he testifies to us in our hearts that Jesus Christ is the risen Son of God. It is good that they show us that thinking God is talking to you entitles you to be sure that he is! How dangerous!

Mark sees no need to try and provide historical evidence that the resurrection happened. He does not indicate that he rejects or accepts that approach – he simply does not use it. Christians say that Mark recognises that evidence is valuable but it cannot make a trust relationship. Unless one experiences the living Jesus and enjoys a relationship with him person to person one never really knows him. Because the saviour is risen and transformed we can have a relationship with him that transcends time and space. This experience of the love and power of the resurrected saviour does what no survey of the historical evidence can do. A man who respects his wife because he keeps a record of her is trusting the evidence not her. There is something distant and impersonal in his approach. It seems possible that Mark intended us to find Jesus risen for ourselves rather than learning from the testimony of the witnesses to the resurrection. But in reality reading all that is reading too much into Mark. Maybe the real reason he had such a lack of concern for evidence is because that it was no good for showing anything definite about Jesus.

Jesus speaks of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit a sin that cannot be forgiven in this world and the next. He said this when the scribes and Pharisees attributed his power as an exorcist to the Devil. The reason this sin cannot be forgiven is that it expresses a refusal to turn to God for forgiveness. To say the Holy Spirit's works are evil, is to say that you have closed your heart. There is no salvation for one who will not let the Holy Spirit reveal Jesus to them. Thus Mark indicated that we must find the truth about Jesus ourselves through the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. He was teaching mystical knowledge not the kind of knowledge that evidence bestows on us. Clearly, he was embarrassed about the legends he was spouting about Jesus and how unhistorical they were.

Some contend that Mark may deliberately refuse to record evidence that the Risen Jesus actually appeared as he thinks his account of Jesus' ministry provided indirect but sufficient evidence. Giving honest and reliable eyewitness testimony to the resurrection appearances would be one way to justify faith in the resurrection. Another way would be to show that Jesus gave evidence during his ministry that he was the Son of God and if he said he was going to rise from the dead that is what he was going to do. His word was sufficient. If this understanding of Mark's intentions is correct then clearly Mark was indicating that he was intentionally writing new scripture. His gospel was the word of Jesus Christ and therefore the Word of God.

Is it possible that Mark knew that the other gospels, Matthew, Luke and John were being compiled? Did he have a good idea what was going to be in their post-resurrection stories? If he did, then was his abrupt ending his way of saying, "Do not take this gospel as the only true one. There will be others and go to them to see the rest of the story." That is speculation and worthless.

The fact that Mark 16:9–20 borrows all its main details (except the reference to miraculous protecting from poison – though it may be held that this is just an expansion of the reference to handling serpents) from other gospels and from the Acts of the Apostles is taken as evidence that Mark did want us to consult other gospels is far-fetched. There may be no direct relationship. And it hangs upon the notion that whoever wrote that section knew Mark well enough to write it and convey that Mark wanted other gospels read alongside this one. If the person intended that then he did not need to write the section.

The primitive Church recognised the Old Testament writings as the word of God. The Lord Jesus had explained that he was prefigured and predicted in the Old Testament. Through the Old Testament, God had prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus in Mark (2:20) uses the symbol of a bridegroom going away to picture his death. Jesus sees this death as forecast in certain prophecies in the Old Testament He views it as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy (12:10-11, 14:21 and 14:27). If we examine the Old Testament influence on Mark we gain a better understanding of what he was saying to us.

We decide that if Mark ended abruptly but deliberately then he was trying to say something - something which to the rational mind undermines the resurrection. The Holy Spirit making us witnesses to the resurrection makes no sense.

The abrupt ending forces us to look at the teachings of Jesus to see if he indicated or said that he would rise again. We have the testimony of two men in white that Jesus rose. But if we are Christians, we prefer the testimony of Jesus speaking as prophet of God. They say he is the one through whom God reveals himself. If the abrupt end was deliberate then Mark directs us to the only person fully qualified to testify to the resurrection: Jesus himself.

The Mark Gospel makes a case for religion being based on feelings and imagination rather than on evidence and history. The historical feel of Mark is a literary device. Nothing more.

If Mark ended abruptly then the resurrection tale is implausible.

If Mark's account was lost then was it removed on purpose for saying something that did not fit the Christian fantasy?

If Mark's account lost the most important part then how could God allow this? It was the first account and its gone! Does not sound like the resurrection had as much to do with God as people are led to believe.

Whatever happened, it might be thought that nobody seems to have seen whatever came after Mark 16:8 for as we said the other gospels act as if there was nothing despite using Mark's passion tale for their own.

Mark is the first gospel and the way it treats the resurrection contradicts the other gospels. Historically it is the one that has to be listened to as it is the one that reads most like history and because of its preeminence in time.

David Guzik's Commentaries on the Bible

<http://www.studylight.org/com/guz/view.cgi?book=mr&chapter=016>).

Mark 16 http://www.religioustolerance.org/mark_16.htm.