CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE LAST TWELVE VERSES OF MARK: ORIGINAL OR NOT?

Any of us who are writers like to impress our intended readers, first by grabbing their attention immediately with a brisk, appropriate opening paragraph. Similarly, we like to conclude our writings with a satisfying climax or summary that our audience feels rounds off our narrative or arguments. The same applies to the biblical authors.

Matthew starts off in grand style with the genealogy; Luke has an elegantly crafted introductory sentence of four verses in length. Both Matthew and Luke have extensive infancy narratives, which set the scene for their stories of the ministry of the incarnate Jesus. John uses the Prologue, possibly a composition already in existence at the time he began writing, in order to emphasize his belief in the preexistence of Jesus. All of those make splendidly appropriate openings. Matthew ends his Gospel with the risen Jesus’ stirring words from the mountain top, dispersing his followers. Luke and John have a satisfying selection of post-Easter appearances that reinforce in a positive way the announcement that the tomb is empty but that he has risen. John has even concocted two endings. John 20 reaches its conclusion in a satisfactory way, but later the author seems to have added chapter 21 as an appendix, again with its own convincing conclusion.

By contrast with these three evangelists, Mark seems rather blunted at both ends. His introduction is very brief, v. 1 looks like a short title, and then immediately after Old Testament citations we are suddenly introduced not to Jesus but to John the Baptist before being taken straight into the baptism story. We shall return to this later. Mark’s ending is disputed. Do we end at v. 8? Do we proceed to v. 20, noting the strange jump from v. 8 to v. 9, even if—or especially if—Mark was responsible for those last twelve verses? Verse 8 ends bizarrely, and that is especially significant if this was the intended conclusion to the Gospel. The section following vv. 1–8 does not logically join on; in fact vv. 9ff seem to parallel vv. 1ff. Those problems are raised by the textual evidence too. Some MSS have vv. 9–20, others do not. And what do we do about the so-called shorter ending? And what about the longer
text in W with the so-called Freer Logion after v. 14? The whole textual situation looks very unstable.

In this chapter we are looking at the way (or ways) in which one of the evangelists, Mark, closed his Gospel. But I am going to extend my investigation by looking at the opening verses of Mark as well. I shall turn to that beginning section a little later.

But, first, we need to remind ourselves that the beginnings and ends of ancient books were particularly vulnerable. That applies to (sc)rolls and to books in codex format. Obviously an unbound codex was liable to be damaged at both ends, but so, too, was a roll—especially if its ending was occasionally exposed when it was not rewound to the beginning after each consultation.1 The disputed ending of Mark may be compared with the various endings of Revelation (where there are nine different readings, seven involving Greek MSS), or Romans and the disparate textual support for its alternative endings. Each of these books has suffered and it may well be that we have lost all traces of their original conclusions. The irretrievable loss of some verses is an eventuality we may have to accept. As far as manuscripts are concerned, many otherwise complete MSS have lost their beginnings and endings. Two obvious instances are Sinaiticus that has lost the beginning of the Old Testament, and Vaticanus where the opening to Genesis has disappeared as has the end of the New Testament. Outside the Bible, there are numerous instances where manuscripts of literary texts are accidentally truncated. The means to restore such damaged texts were not always to hand, even when the mutilations were conspicuous.

We shall turn now to look at the external evidence for the ending of Mark at 16:8, as well as at the linkage of vv. 8–9. Then we shall examine the internal evidence for the Markan authorship of 16:9–20. This means that we shall look at the language and style of those verses, then their theological content. We shall then pose certain questions: How did Mark lose its original ending and thus circulate in some witnesses ending at v. 8? Was it deliberate or accidental? If vv. 9–20 are secondary we need to ask when they were added.

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