By contrast with Matthew, Luke and John, 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. I have argued elsewhere\(^1\) that Mark 1:1–3 was not written by Mark but that those verses were added to Mark after an original introduction was lost or felt to be in need of replacement. Now, however, we are concerned with the ending of Mark. Do we conclude this Gospel at 16:8? The verse is incomplete; it finishes abruptly, and that is especially significant if it was the intended conclusion to the Gospel. Or do we proceed to v. 20, noting the strange jump from v. 8 to v. 9? The section following verses 1–8 does not logically join on; in fact verses 9–16 seem to parallel verses 1 following. Those problems are caused by the textual evidence. Some manuscripts have verses 9–20, others do not. The whole textual situation is unstable.

First, we need to remind ourselves that the beginnings and ends of ancient books were particularly vulnerable. That applies to 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\(^2\). The disputed ending of Mark may be compared with the various endings of Revelation (where there are many different readings, at least seven involving Greek manuscripts), 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 documents 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 have been accidentally truncated. The means to restore such damaged texts were not always to hand, even when the mutilations were conspicuous.

Only two early Greek manuscripts and one medieval Greek manuscript\(^3\), from among the thousand or so extant witnesses that contain Mark’s Gospel, end Mark at 16:8. The two early manuscripts are in fact the earliest we have containing the whole of Mark, yet it is on the authority given to these two witnesses that most critical editions of the Greek New Testament and most modern versions reach their climax to Mark with the cliff-hanging but inconclusive v. 8 ending with the particle \(\gamma\alpha\omicron\omicron\) (\(\gamma\alpha\)).

These two manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, splendidly produced and evidently prepared as de luxe editions, were possibly written in response to Constantine’s request for fifty Greek Bibles for his new capital. What is certain is that they represent attempts to define the Christian canon, as it had by then developed, and to show this collection between one set of covers. Those editions did not spawn imitators\(^4\). Generally, what continued to be copied by the church were the Gospels alone, or the Pauline corpus for example; and it was not until the Middle Ages that we again find complete New Testaments being produced.

Whole Greek Bibles, Old Testament and New Testament, were not fashionable. One may therefore suspect that not only were these 4th-century witnesses, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, peculiar in their scale and

---

3 These are Sinaiticus (\(\aleph\) 01), Vaticanus (B 03) and the 12th-century minuscule 304 (which had presumably been part of a four-Gospel codex). We exclude the 12th-century 2386 that at one time appeared in the apparatus to the Greek New Testament (e.g. UBS\(^1\)) in support of Mark ending at 16:8. This manuscript merely has its last page of Mark missing; it may be used as an example of how the accidental shortening of Mark could have occurred at this exact place. On the history, text and characteristics of Vaticanus see P. Andrist (ed.), Le manuscrit B de la Bible (Vaticanus graecus 1209) (Lausanne, 2010) = Histoire du texte biblique 7.

4 So much for Farmer’s opinion that Alexandrian manuscripts like those two were particularly influential. See W.R. Farmer, The Last Twelve Verses of Mark (Cambridge, 1974) = SNTS Monograph 25.