THE WOMEN, THE TOMB, AND THE CLIMAX OF MARK

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The “ending” of Mark is one of the most widely-known problems in New Testament studies, involving both text-critical and exegetical issues. It is almost unanimously agreed that none of the variant material after 16:8 forms an original part of Mark, and, although one still encounters the view that an original ending beyond 16:8 was lost, the more widely shared view today is that the author in fact chose to end his story of Jesus at this point. But, if on text-critical grounds 16:8 is widely accepted as the most likely original ending, this only highlights the difficult exegetical issue: How are we to understand the way the author of the Gospel of Mark chose to conclude this influential account?

In this paper, I hope to deploy good reasons for holding that 16:1–8 was intended as an entirely meaningful, encouraging, and positive climax to this influential story of Jesus, and not the somewhat anti-climactic and ambiguous scene so often posited in scholarship today. This contention goes against what are now some widely-held views. To make my case, therefore, will require some sustained attention to a selection of important matters.

One of the most crucial of these is how to understand the characterization and narrative function of the women disciples in the scene. Women are the sole human figures in Mark 16:1–8, and, as increasingly recognized today, they are also important in two key earlier scenes in the passion narrative (15:40–41, 47). But the question of what to make of these women awaits a widely-persuasive answer. So, en route

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1 It is a great pleasure to offer this study to Sean Freyne (whatever he may think of the argument!), with whom I first became acquainted during his fine set of Gunning Lectures given at New College, Edinburgh in the Spring of 2000.


3 In this essay, I revise markedly some of my own earlier judgements about the Markan conclusion. Cf. Hurtado 1989, esp. 279–86.

4 Cf., e.g., Danove 1996, but I take a very different view of matters.
to an adequate analysis of Mark 16:1–8, we shall first consider Mark’s deployment of women followers of Jesus in the final two chapters of his pioneering book about Jesus.

**The Women Disciples in 15:40–16:8**

There is now a considerable and still-growing body of scholarship on Mark’s treatment of women, especially women followers of Jesus. The women in Mark 16:1–8 have received by far the greatest attention, and this scene will also be crucial in my analysis as well. Although Dibelius referred to the women as “superfluous” in 16:1–8, in more recent study we have come to see that they are important in the author’s literary strategy. This particular group of identified women followers of Jesus appears in three crucial Markan scenes, and only these three times in Mark, in the passion and resurrection narratives (15:40, 47; 16:1). All three references to the women are significant for appreciating their prominence in the final scene. I want to underscore several observations about these women.

I begin with their unexpected appearance in the Markan narrative. In the first of the references to them, 15:40–41, the author suddenly throws the spotlight on three particular women, and also tells us that a larger number of women had in fact been followers of Jesus in Galilee all along. Thereby, in these two short verses the author introduces an unnumbered body of women followers of Jesus, and in effect, retroactively inserts them into the whole preceding account of Jesus’ activities. Contra some interpreters, I contend that the previous absence of

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5 On the textual/literary question of how the author of Mark deploys the women identified in the passion-resurrection narratives, see Malbon 1983 and 1986; Kinukawa 1994; Aquino and McLemore 1995; Fander 1992. The most recent book length study of women in Mark finds “conflicting interpretations of Mark’s attitude to women” (Miller 2004, 5).

6 Dibelius (1935, 190) referred to the women as mentioned “superfluously” after 15:47, and saw no important connection among the three named references in 15:40–16:8.

7 A variant reading supported by Vaticanus and a number of other manuscripts posits a fourth, unnamed woman, identified as “the mother of Joseph” (ἡΙωσῆτοςμήτηρ), and Pesch (1977, 506–8) strongly preferred this reading as original. I support the judgement reflected in the Nestle-Aland 27th ed. text.

8 The imperfect verbs in 15:41 (ἠκολούθουν and διηκόνουν) portray the women’s discipleship in Galilee as repeated/extended activities. The omission of καὶ διηκόνουν αὐτῷ in C, D, Δ, 579, et al. is almost certainly the result of homoiooteleuton. In 1924–28,