

Who changed the Bible?¹

The ending of Mark's Gospel raises a really big question about whether or not we can trust the Bible. In the New International Version, after verse 8 there's a line and a note that *the earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-20* and then verses 9-20 are printed in italics. Similar things are found in most translations. If, however, you read the (New) King James Versions there is no note and Mark 16 finishes at verse 20.

What's going on?

For over 300 years, all English Bibles included these verses, but now almost all suggest there's something unusual about these five paragraphs. Does this 'change' mean we can't trust the Bible - that there's someone 'fiddling' with God's word?

Errors and Evidence

Until the invention of the printing press, all books were copied by hand. The process of copying Biblical books in the original languages (Greek and Hebrew) by hand means mistakes happened.² Most differences are changes in spelling (especially of names), or mistakes that come about by skipping a word or line. Occasionally a copier might 'correct' what he thought was a mistake—for example changing a paraphrase from another part of the Bible to be a word-for-word quotation.

The Bible is the most widely copied and circulated book in antiquity and many ancient copies (some dating to the third and second centuries after Christ) are still around today. This means that we have lots of information about the differences between copies, information that can be used to help work out what's an error and what was originally written.

Trembling and bewildered?

So what about the end of Mark?

There are *five* different endings in the ancient copies of Mark's Gospel! Many include verses 9-20, the oldest stop at verse 8, and a few have different endings again (variations on verses 9-20). What does this mean, and most importantly, what should we consider to be God's Word?

The earliest copies we have of Mark's gospel in the original language stop at verse 8. This might seem a 'hands down' case against verses 9-20. But although these copies are ancient, they were made more than 300 years after the time of Jesus. There's also evidence from Christians writing in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, which tells us what they knew and thought about the end of Mark's



¹ Written by Daniel Saunders for Gympie Presbyterian Church, Easter 2022 to supplement a Resurrection Sunday sermon on Mark 16.

² The advent of the printing press didn't stop mistakes. Search online for the 'Wicked Bible' for an example of a notable mistake in an early printed Bible!

Gospel. On the one hand, Irenaeus (130-202 AD) quotes Mark 16:19 in something he wrote around the year 180 AD. The context of the quote is an outline of Mark's gospel, so he was certain the verse was an authentic part of the Gospel. On the other hand, Eusebius (260-339) doubted the authenticity of verses 9-20. He says almost all copies of Mark in his day end at verse 8. What this tells us is although the long ending of Mark dates to at least the second century, Christians have been questioning its authenticity for almost all of Christian history.

Can we trust God's Word?

So what are we to do with the end of Mark? Due to the ancient evidence against the longer ending being originally part of Mark's gospel, I don't have confidence it's God's Word. This means I won't preach on these uncertain verses. Far from being undermining our confidence in the Bible, this conclusion is because we do have confidence that Mark 1:1-16:8 is a historically reliable account of Jesus' life and is God's Word.

Parts of the Bible like Mark 16 can make people think the Bible is unreliable because it's been changed either by accident or conspiracy. The evidence, however, points the opposite way. There's no conspiracy, all the evidence about the differences between ancient copies of the Bible is public knowledge—modern Bibles tell us where any significant differences are and what the alternatives are. That this is something that comes up very rarely (the end of Mark's gospel stands out as one of the few cases), we can have confidence that the Scriptures we have are reliable, historical, and God's Word.

Want more:

Most recent commentaries on Mark's Gospel (and even study Bibles) will have a discussion about the reliability of these verses.

These articles from *The Gospel Coalition* and *Got Questions?* give a little bit more of the technical details

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/was-mark-16-9-20-originally-mark-gospel/>

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Mark-16-9-20.html>

The New English Translation has a long footnote on the longer ender. It uses some slightly technical language but is a good summary. You can read it at <https://netbible.org/bible/Mark+16>

Andrew Errington has written a booklet *Can we trust what the gospels say about Jesus?* It briefly deals with this issue as well as other historical questions. You can get it from Matthias Media <https://matthiasmedia.com.au/collections/books/products/can-we-trust-the-gospels>