

Textual Criticism Brief: Mark 16:9-20

David P. Kuske

The NIV often follows a shorter reading of the Greek text than that which is reproduced in the King James Version. One of the most striking of the suggested omissions is that which is found at the end of Mark's gospel. After Mark 16:8 the NIV has a break and a line, followed by this note: "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20." In *A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT* (p 122-126) Dr. Bruce Metzger gives the primary reasons for the view of the NIV editors favoring the omission of these verses:

- 1) These verses are absent from the oldest Greek codexes, δ and B, from the Old Latin (it^k), from the Sinaitic Syriac (syr^s), from Armenian and Georgian texts, and from Eusebius, Jerome, and the original form of the Eusebian sections. Some manuscripts that have the long ending note that it is omitted from other Greek manuscripts.
- 2) The vocabulary of verses 9-20 is non-Markan. Metzger cites eleven words or expressions that are not found elsewhere in Mark's gospel.
- 3) The connection between verse 8 and verse 9 is awkward, since the subject of verse 8 is the women while the unstated subject of verse 9 (supplied by the NIV) is Jesus.

Upon investigation one finds each of these arguments to be quite weak. First, the manuscript evidence. B does not include these verses, but the value of B as a reliable, early witness for omission is severely compromised. The scribe who copied B left a blank space in the text where these verses belong, thus indicating that he felt the manuscript he was copying was defective at this point. Though Metzger cites Jerome as a witness for omission, these verses are included in the Vulgate, the official Latin translation he prepared for use in the church. Eusebius did not say verses 9-20 were missing. He said only that the Greek note $\tau\epsilon\lambda$ was written in the text after verse 8. The notes $\alpha\rho\chi$ and $\tau\epsilon\lambda$ were at times written into the Greek text to mark the beginning and end of lections. So Eusebius cannot be cited as a conclusive witness for the omission of these verses. Though the original form of the Eusebian sections might indicate that Eusebius took the $\tau\epsilon\lambda$ note as marking the end of Mark, the inclusion of these verses in the later form of the Eusebian sections indicates that the early church felt that, if Eusebius took verse 8 as the end of Mark, he misread what this note meant. This mistake of reading this note as the end of Mark rather than as the end of a lection also seems to be the reason uncial B omitted these verses. The scribe who copied B misread the $\tau\epsilon\lambda$ and $\alpha\rho\chi$ notes in at least five other places (Lk 22:43-44, Jn 19:34, Lk 23:34, Lk 7:1, and Jn 8:59).

The reason for the different vocabulary in these verses is that Mark is writing about subject matter that is different than anything he covered earlier in his gospel. Furthermore, the switch of subjects between verse 8 and verse 9 is not awkward if one notes that Mark has finished the account of the women coming to the tomb and is moving on to Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene. Nor is it strange that Jesus is not mentioned as the subject in verse 9 since he is the focus of all that Mark is reporting at this point in the text.

That leaves only δ along with it^k and syr^s (the "other ancient witnesses" to which the NIV refers) as evidence for omission. Though this uncial and these two translations are early, consider the host of other ancient witnesses that include these verses: uncials A, C, D, W, the Vulgate, the Coptic bohairic, the Syriac c, h, pal, and p (the official Bible of the early Syriac church), Irenaeus, Nestorius, Ambrose, Augustine, the Apostolic Constitutions, and the Diatessaron (a composite of the gospels made in the 2nd century).

The NIV's statement that “the most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses” indicate that verses 9-20 are not part of the inspired text does not square with the evidence. Add to this two more points that John Burgon raises in his book *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*. Burgon lists eight lections used in the early church that either began or ended at Mark 16:8 and suggests that this may have contributed to confusion about the inclusion of verses 9-20 when lections began to be marked in Greek manuscripts with αρχ and τελ. He also shows that by 300 AD these verses were part of the lection used in every part of the Christian church on two of its most important festivals, Easter and Ascension. He argues that it would be hard to imagine that this portion of Scripture would have received such prominence if it were spurious. To this writer this last item is impossible to explain if these verses were not part of the inspired text used in the early Christian church.

Given all of the above, it is evident that the argument advanced by those who cast doubt on verses 9 to 20 of Mark 16 is less than convincing.

