How Mark's Gospel ends: study guide

Module 18: Textual Criticism and Major Variant Passages.

Rereading and highlighting feel productive, but they build little memory. Testing yourself builds it: cover each answer, try to recall it, then check. Come back to the guide on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. Does any original, handwritten copy of a New Testament book survive?
2. What do scholars call a place where copies of a text differ?
3. Name one way a modern Bible can show that a passage is doubtful.

Key terms

The evidence

- Manuscript: A copy of a text written by hand.

Why it matters: Every copy of Mark before printing was handwritten. What follows from that?

- Codex: A book with pages, as opposed to a scroll. Sinaiticus, Vaticanus and Alexandrinus are codices.

Why it matters: Why might a whole Bible in one codex tell us more than a single page?

- Early writer: An ancient author who quotes or mentions a passage, such as Irenaeus.

Why it matters: How can a writer's quotation show that a passage existed even before our oldest complete copies?

- Copyist's note: A remark a copyist wrote into a manuscript, such as the notes in L before each ending of Mark saying that these words too are found in some copies.

Why it matters: What does a note like that tell us about the copies the copyist had at hand?

The differences

- Manuscript difference (textual variant): A place where copies of a text differ in wording.

Why it matters: Why would a difference matter more when it changes the story than when it changes spelling?

- Reading: The wording a particular copy has at a place where copies differ.

Why it matters: Why do scholars compare readings rather than whole manuscripts?

- Longer ending of Mark: Mark 16:9-20, twelve verses missing from some of the oldest copies, which most scholars think were added later.

Why it matters: What changes for a reader if Mark ends with fear at the tomb rather than with appearances of the risen Jesus?

- Shorter Ending of Mark: Two sentences found after 16:8 in some copies: the women report briefly to Peter and those with him, and Jesus sends out the message of eternal salvation from east to west.

Why it matters: Why might a copy have both the Shorter Ending and verses 9 to 20?

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- Freer Logion: A passage that one Greek copy, Codex Washingtonianus, adds after verse 14 of the longer ending.

Why it matters: What does an addition found in only one copy suggest about how the ending grew?

The judgment

- Internal evidence: Evidence from inside the text: which wording best explains how the other arose, and whether the words and style fit the author.

Why it matters: Why do scholars weigh what a copyist was likely to do, not only how old the copies are?

- Standard Greek text (NA28): The current scholarly edition of the Greek New Testament (2012), which the modern translations the site compares often follow.

Why it matters: Why would editors print a passage they think was added later?

- Double brackets: The mark the standard Greek text puts around a passage it judges a later addition.

Why it matters: What does a reader learn from brackets that they would miss without them?

Timeline

- 30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus (Most scholars agree). Dated to about 30 CE. Ehrman and Méndez say no one knows for certain, but scholars agree it was around 30; Brown, and Carson and Moo, give 30 or 33, and Carson and Moo find 30 slightly preferable.
- 65 to 75 CE: Mark (Most scholars agree). Written between 65 and 75 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 175 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 175 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 300 to 340 CE: Eusebian Canons and Ammonian Sections (Nearly all scholars agree). The canon tables were devised by Eusebius in the fourth century.
- about the middle of the 4th century: Codex Vaticanus (B (03)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown and Metzger both date it to about the middle of the 4th century.
- about the middle of the 4th century: Codex Sinaiticus (Aleph (01)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown and Metzger both date it to about the middle of the 4th century.
- 382 to 405 CE: Latin Vulgate (Nearly all scholars agree). Made between 382 and 405 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- early 5th century: Codex Alexandrinus (A (02)) (Nearly all scholars agree). Brown dates it to the early 5th century, and Metzger calls it a 5th-century book.
- 415 to 417 CE: Jerome quotes the opening of the Freer Logion. Jerome's Dialogue against the Pelagians (Book 2, section 15) says that some copies, especially Greek ones, add words at the end of Mark, and quotes in Latin the disciples' excuse that opens the Freer Logion. The years date Jerome's work, not the manuscript.
- 1611 CE: King James Version. Made in 1611, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 1881 CE: Westcott and Hort. Published in 1881, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 1906 CE: Codex Washingtonianus acquired (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated to 1906, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 1908 CE: Freer Logion first published (Nearly all scholars agree). The passage was first made known in December 1907, when Henry A. Sanders announced the newly bought Freer manuscripts (his lecture was printed in 1908) and newspapers reported a new verse of Mark.

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- 2005 CE: Robinson-Pierpont Byzantine Text. Published in 2005, a date scholars broadly accept. The Majority Text approach is a minority view among textual critics.
- 2012 to 2014 CE: NA28, UBS5 and the Editio Critica Maior. Published between 2012 and 2014, a date scholars broadly accept.

Explain it

In your own words: how can writers like Irenaeus, Eusebius and Jerome, who lived long after Mark was written, help historians judge which ending is earlier?

Worked example: the ending of Mark

How a textual critic weighs Mark 16:9-20, in four steps.

1. Read the evidence: List who has which ending. Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus (both about the middle of the 4th century) stop at 16:8; Codex Alexandrinus (early 5th century), most later copies and Irenaeus's quotation have verses 9 to 20; Codex Bobiensis has only the Shorter Ending, and L and several other copies have both.
2. Weigh the outside evidence: Ask how old each piece is and how independent. The two oldest complete copies agree in lacking the passage, and Eusebius and Jerome say almost all the Greek copies they knew did too; Irenaeus shows it was known by about 175 to 185 CE. Both sides are early, so age alone does not settle it, but the oldest copies and those reports count heavily.
3. Ask what a copyist would do: Textual critics ask which wording best explains how the other arose. A copyist faced with a Gospel that stops at the women's fear is more likely to add an ending than to remove twelve verses about the risen Jesus. Metzger adds that the words and style of verses 9 to 20 are unlike Mark's and that verse 9 does not follow smoothly from verse 8.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Most scholars conclude that Mark 16:9-20 was added after the Gospel was first written. The site labels this judgment "Nearly all scholars agree". Brown reports another view, that Mark's own ending was lost, and the text of most later copies, which a minority of textual critics favor, keeps the passage.

Your turn: angry or moved with compassion

A man with a skin disease asks Jesus for healing. The first two steps are done for you; write the last two before you open the answer.

1. Read the evidence: Codex Sinaiticus says Jesus was "moved with compassion"; Codex Bezae says he was "moved with anger".
2. Weigh the outside evidence: The site records just these two copies for this difference, so the outside evidence alone does not decide it.

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3. Ask what a copyist would do: Which change is a copyist more likely to have made, and why?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What would you conclude, and how sure can you be?

Common misconceptions

The habit practiced here, checking a popular claim against what the copies show, works on any historical source, ancient or modern.

- Many people think the Bible was passed down like the game of telephone, one copy after another, so that the earliest wording is lost for good. That picture does not match how the text survives. Copies were made in many places at once, and scholars do not depend on the last copy in a chain. They compare surviving copies from different times and places, including early ones such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, together with early writers like Irenaeus. That comparison is how the editors of the standard Greek text reach a judgment about Mark's ending.
- Some readers think modern Bibles quietly deleted the end of Mark. The passage has not been deleted; it is printed and marked. The standard Greek text prints Mark 16:9-20 inside double brackets, and the ESV and the NRSVue print it in brackets; Brown notes that many Bibles print it as part of the text of Mark. Marking a passage tells readers what the oldest copies show while keeping a passage that is old and was copied widely.
- Some people conclude from the differences between copies that nothing about the text can be known. Differences do not make every judgment equally uncertain. Scholars say how sure they are place by place, and the evidence at each place sets how sure they can be. For the end of Mark the site labels the judgment "Nearly all scholars agree"; for Mark 1:41 it labels it "Scholars are split".

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Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. Where do Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus end the Gospel of Mark?

A. At 16:20, with the longer ending

B. At 16:14, before the commission

C. At 16:8

Reason: Why does that matter to scholars?

A. They are the most often copied manuscripts.

B. They are two of the oldest complete copies of the New Testament, from about the middle of the 4th century.

C. They were made in the 1st century, soon after Mark was written.

2. Which early writer quotes the longer ending in a work written about 175 to 185 CE?

A. Irenaeus

B. Eusebius

C. Jerome

Reason: What does his quotation show?

A. That the oldest copies are wrong and should be ignored.

B. That Mark himself wrote the passage.

C. That the passage was known by about 175 to 185 CE.

3. How does the standard Greek text (NA28) print Mark 16:9-20?

A. It leaves the passage out entirely

B. Inside double brackets

C. In a footnote only

Reason: Why print it at all?

A. It is old and was copied widely, though the editors judge it a later addition.

B. The editors think Mark wrote it.

C. Every manuscript has it.

4. What did Eusebius and Jerome write about the Greek copies of Mark they knew?

A. Almost all of them had verses 9 to 20

B. Most of them had the Shorter Ending instead

C. Almost all of them ended at 16:8

Reason: What does their report add to the evidence?

A. It proves that Mark wrote verses 9 to 20.

B. It shows that the ending at 16:8 was the usual one in the copies these later scholars knew.

C. It shows that they rejected the Gospel of Mark.

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5. A copyist finds a Gospel that ends with the women afraid at the tomb. Which change is more likely?

A. Copying it exactly, since copyists never changed what they copied

B. Adding an ending

C. Removing the last scene

Reason: Which idea is this reasoning based on?

A. The longest wording is always the oldest.

B. Count the copies and follow the majority.

C. Ask which wording best explains how the other arose.

6. What label does ExtantBible give the judgment that the text without Mark 16:9-20 is earlier?

A. Nearly all scholars agree

B. Scholars are split

C. Most scholars agree

Reason: What does a label measure?

A. Whether the passage is true.

B. How widely a judgment is held among scholars.

C. How many copies have the passage.

7. At Mark 1:41, which judgment does the site label "Scholars are split"?

A. That the verse was added later

B. That "moved with compassion" is the earlier reading

C. That Codex Bezae is the oldest copy

Reason: Why is this case less certain than the ending of Mark?

A. Only two copies are recorded, and the reasoning about copyists points the other way.

B. No copy of that chapter survives.

C. Most copies say "moved with anger".

8. Which statement is a historical judgment rather than a statement of belief?

A. The longer ending of Mark is the word of God.

B. The longer ending of Mark should not be read in church.

C. Most scholars judge the longer ending of Mark to be a later addition.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. It agrees with what most people think.

B. It is stated with confidence.

C. It describes evidence and who holds a view, and can be checked.

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Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
Does any original handwritten copy of Mark survive?	No. Mark survives only in later handwritten copies.
Where do Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus end Mark, and when were they made?	At 16:8, without verses 9 to 20. Both are from about the middle of the 4th century.
Name a major early copy that includes the longer ending of Mark.	Codex Alexandrinus, from the early 5th century (and most later copies).
Which early writer quotes the longer ending about 175 to 185 CE?	Irenaeus.
What is the Shorter Ending of Mark?	Two sentences after 16:8: the women report briefly to Peter and those with him, and Jesus sends out the message of eternal salvation from east to west.
Which copy has the Shorter Ending without verses 9 to 20?	Codex Bobiensis, a copy of an early Latin translation.
Which Greek copy puts a note before each of two endings of Mark?	L (019), a Greek copy of the Gospels in Paris: it gives the Shorter Ending and then verses 9 to 20.
What did Eusebius and Jerome report about the Greek copies of Mark they knew?	That almost all of them ended at 16:8.
How does the standard Greek text (NA28) print the longer ending of Mark?	Inside double brackets, as a later addition.
What does the longer ending add to Mark?	Appearances of the risen Jesus, a commission to the disciples and the ascension.
What label does ExtantBible give the judgment that the text without 16:9-20 is earlier?	"Nearly all scholars agree."
What question do textual critics ask about two readings?	Which reading best explains how the other arose.
Why is a copyist more likely to have added an ending to Mark than removed one?	A Gospel that stops at the women's fear invites an ending; there is no clear reason to remove twelve verses about the risen Jesus.
What other view of the ending does Raymond Brown report?	That some scholars argue strongly that Mark's own ending was lost, perhaps with a last page, since 16:7 promises an appearance in Galilee.

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Question	Answer
What are the two readings where Jesus heals a man with a skin disease, early in Mark?	"Moved with compassion" and "moved with anger".
What extra passage does Codex Washingtonianus add to the longer ending?	The Freer Logion, after verse 14.

Answers

Warm-up

1. No. Every book survives only in later copies made by hand.
2. A textual variant (on this site, a manuscript difference).
3. Brackets, a footnote, or a heading or note before the passage.

Why it matters

- Manuscript: Copying by hand lets small changes, slips and additions creep in, and each new copy can pass them on, so copies differ and have to be compared.
- Codex: A complete codex shows where a book ends and what comes after it, so we can see that Mark stops at 16:8 and is not just missing a torn-off page.
- Early writer: If a writer can be dated, his quotation proves the passage was in some copies by then. Irenaeus quotes verse 19 about 175 to 185 CE, over a century and a half before Sinaiticus and Vaticanus were made.
- Copyist's note: That the copyist knew copies with different endings and chose to give both, telling the reader so.
- Manuscript difference (textual variant): A spelling change leaves the meaning as it was; twelve verses about the risen Jesus change how a whole Gospel ends.
- Reading: A copy can be early and careful in one place and late or changed in another, so each place is judged on its own evidence.
- Longer ending of Mark: The two endings leave readers with different last scenes: an empty tomb and silent women, or appearances, a commission and the ascension.
- Shorter Ending of Mark: Its copyist knew both endings in different copies and kept both rather than choose, as the notes in L show.
- Freer Logion: That the ending kept being added to after it was written, by some copyists in some places, so later additions can be told apart from earlier ones.
- Internal evidence: Age alone does not settle every case: a change that copyists were likely to make in one direction, such as completing an abrupt ending, points to which wording came first.
- Standard Greek text (NA28): Because it is old, was copied widely and has been read for centuries, and printing it in brackets shows readers both the passage and the judgment about it.
- Double brackets: That the editors judge the words a later addition, though old enough to keep in the text.

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Explain it

Each can be dated, so each shows which endings were known at a certain time and place. Irenaeus shows verses 9 to 20 were known by about 175 to 185 CE; Eusebius and Jerome, two centuries later, report that almost all the Greek copies they knew ended at 16:8. Together with the copies, they show both endings were old, and that the ending at 16:8 was still the usual one in the copies these scholars checked.

Your turn: angry or moved with compassion

3. Ask what a copyist would do: Bart Ehrman and Hugo Méndez argue that a copyist was more likely to change "anger" to "compassion" than the reverse, which would favor "anger" as the earlier wording. Metzger grants that this change is easy to explain and the opposite is not.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: A majority of the committee behind the United Bible Societies' edition preferred "moved with compassion", and Metzger calls a firm decision difficult. The site labels this judgment "Scholars are split", so a careful answer states both readings and how uncertain the choice is.

Self-test

1. Answer C, reason B. Both end at 16:8, and their age (about the middle of the 4th century) gives that agreement weight. They are not the most often copied (most copies are later), and they were not made in the 1st century: no copy from Mark's own time survives.
2. Answer A, reason C. Irenaeus quotes verse 19 in a work written about 175 to 185 CE, which shows the passage was known by then. It does not show who wrote it, and it does not overturn the oldest copies; it adds a second early piece of evidence. Eusebius and Jerome wrote later and report that almost all the Greek copies they knew lacked it.
3. Answer B, reason A. The editors judge it a later addition but print it in double brackets because it is old and widely copied. They do not think Mark wrote it, and not every manuscript has it: Sinaiticus and Vaticanus do not.
4. Answer C, reason B. Each wrote that almost all the Greek copies they knew ended at 16:8, which agrees with Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. They were answering a question about the passage, not rejecting the Gospel of Mark, and their report does not show who wrote verses 9 to 20.
5. Answer B, reason C. Scholars ask which reading explains the other. An abrupt ending invites a copyist to complete it, so the shorter text explains the longer one better than the reverse. Copyists did change texts (the copies with two endings show it), and neither length nor a head count settles a case by itself.
6. Answer A, reason B. The labels say how widely a view is held among scholars: "Nearly all scholars agree" means few or no serious specialists dispute it. They are not a verdict on truth or faith, and they do not count copies.
7. Answer B, reason A. A majority of the editors preferred "moved with compassion", and Metzger calls a firm decision difficult. With little outside evidence and an argument that copyists softened "anger", the result is uncertain. Copies of Mark 1 do survive, and the site records only two copies here, one for each wording.
8. Answer C, reason C. A historical judgment describes evidence and attributes a view to the people who hold it, so anyone can check it. How many people agree, or how confidently it is said, does not make a statement historical. The other two are statements of belief or practice, which communities decide for themselves.

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