

Mark 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 16 And they were alarmed.

And he said to them, Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.

There you will see him, just as he told you. And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept.

But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

[1 : 24] Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves, as they were reclining at table. And he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

And he said to them, Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

And these signs will accompany those who believe. In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison it will not hurt them.

They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.

And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. Mark chapter 16 is the final chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

[2 : 22] It's the climax of the story, but it also raises a number of difficulties, as verses 9 to 20 aren't in the oldest extant versions of the text. The chapter begins with the two Marys and Salome, the same three women as were at the foot of the cross, first buying spices and then going to the tomb to anoint the corpse of Jesus.

The fact that they are bringing spices suggests that they were not anticipating the resurrection, despite Jesus' words. Possibly they considered Jesus' statements about his resurrection as more of a cryptic statement, not to be taken literally.

They come very shortly after dawn, and they are wondering about how to remove the large stone, but it has already mysteriously been moved. This is strange due to the size of the stone, and how difficult it would be to move it.

Going inside the tomb, they see a young man dressed in a white robe, striking enough to be seen in the darkness of a tomb. White clothes, as we see elsewhere in scripture, are associated with heaven, the heavenly clothes.

He's sitting there, which is strange. He's clearly not an ordinary bystander, but has the hallmarks of an angel, and their response is to be very afraid. He gives them the message that Jesus has risen.

[3 : 35] His body hasn't been taken. He is raised from the dead and has moved on, and he invites them to see the place where his body was, to see that it has gone, to be witnesses of what has taken place.

Jesus has moved on ahead of them. They need to catch up. This isn't just someone who almost died, and then revived and came to, and then is limping away. Christ is moving with the speed, the alacrity that we see elsewhere in the gospel.

He's the one who does things straightway, suddenly, immediately. And here we see Christ again going before them. He's leading the way. He's calling his servants to a staging ground of a new mission.

And he's calling them back to the site where it all began, in Galilee. In Mark chapter 14, verse 28, Jesus had already declared that he would see them in Galilee after his resurrection.

But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee. The man instructs the women to tell the disciples and Peter. The fact that Peter is spoken of in distinction from the disciples suggests some breach has been created after his denial.

[4 : 41] Although he is still associated with the disciples, he does not see himself truly as one of them in the same way. There is need for restoration, and the fact that the women are sent with a message for him, as well as the other disciples, already hints at such a restoration occurring.

What we see here is a sort of lesser commission. There is a greater commission coming up, but here the women are sent with a message to the disciples. They flee from the tomb in trembling and astonishment, and don't tell anyone, because they were afraid.

In Matthew's account, we see that the commission had to be given by Christ himself to the women before they passed it on to the disciples. Matthew chapter 28, verses 9 to 10. And behold, Jesus met them and said greetings.

And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. Should verses 9 to 20 be included in the Gospel of Mark?

Historically, these have been taken as scripture by the church. But in two of the oldest extant texts, they are absent. There seems to be none Markan terminology and style according to certain authors and commentators.

[5 : 55] Some have argued that what we see here is a pastiche of elements from the Gospels, Acts and other sources. And it's not really Mark at all. Some argue that Mark intended to end his Gospel at verse 8, perhaps to put the ball in the reader's court.

This strange ending invites the reader to come into the story and to think about what happens next. How did they respond? Others claim he meant to go on, but he didn't. Perhaps he wanted to complete it, but didn't have the opportunity.

Some say that an original ending might have been lost. And others that there were alternative, yet genuine versions of Mark in circulation. So the shorter ending and the longer ending were both genuine versions of Mark, from Mark's hand, but both circulated in different quarters.

Nicholas Lunn makes a persuasive case, for me at least, that verses 9 to 20 come from Mark's hand and that they were his intended ending. He dismantles, first of all, the claim that the language and style is not Mark's.

He shows that if we applied the same criteria to undisputed texts throughout the Gospel, we would be led to dismiss them too. So it seems strange that we would apply here what we would not apply to other parts of the Gospel.

[7 : 09] If Mark 16 has much the same sort of degree of variety as we find in other Mark and passages, then why shouldn't we accept it as genuine? Furthermore, the absence of the longer ending in the two oldest extant texts isn't the slam-dunk that some think.

First, we have references to the longer ending in texts that long predate these manuscripts, so within certain of the Church Fathers and elsewhere. Second, the actual texts in question give suggestive evidence that their copyists were aware of longer versions of the ending and that they were either purposefully excluding them, in one case, or perhaps leaving space for them to be added at a later point, in the other case.

His most persuasive arguments, for me at least, however, are literary and thematic. Some of these are stronger than others, but together I think that they make a strong case. First, the conclusion involves a thematic return to the beginning of the Gospel.

The Gospel begins with the forerunner at the beginning, and it ends with the successors. Jesus comes from Galilee at the beginning, and he goes to Galilee at the end. Second, John the Baptist begins with preaching, and then the disciples end with preaching.

There's third, the descent of the Spirit from heaven, and then at the end, the ascent of Christ into heaven. Then there's the calling of disciples to become fishers of men, and then the sending of the disciples out into the world to be fishers of men.

[8 : 38] And then fifth, John foretells the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and then Jesus speaks of the Pentecostal signs that will follow his disciples. There are verbal connections too.

Only in the prologue, in verse 3, and in the epilogue, do we find the term Lord being used of Christ by the narrator. Second, the term baptism is very important at the beginning and the end, but yet is absent throughout much of the rest of the Gospel, except used in reference to things that aren't related to Christian baptism.

The expression preach the Gospel is found in verse 14 of chapter 1, and in verse 15 of chapter 16. These are the only occasions with the active form of this verb and noun combination.

And then fourth, the relationship between preaching and faith is prominent in both places, in verse 15 of chapter 1, and in verse 16 of chapter 16. These features for Lund suggest that Mark intended an inclusio, a bookending of the material of his Gospel.

We see the same thing in Luke, and we see it in Matthew as well. Beyond this, there are themes of prediction and fulfilment throughout Mark's Gospel. We have a lot of different predictions, and then these are fulfilled step by step.

[9 : 56] In Mark 10, for instance, verses 32 to 34, It would be strange indeed if Mark, after highlighting the fulfilment of each aspect of Jesus' prophecy concerning his death, didn't end with a very strong witness to the resurrection.

Lund notes that Mark uses foreshadowing on occasions in his Gospel, and observes the way that various elements of the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter, a story that anticipates Jesus' own resurrection, these elements reappear in the ending of chapter 16.

He identifies nine such related phrases. Beyond this, he argues, verses 1 to 8 and verses 9 to 20 of chapter 16 are two paralleled frames of narrative.

He shows that both of these two blocks of verses can be broken down into four sections each, and these four sections parallel each other. Both, for instance, begin with Mary Magdalene on the first day of the week.

Both contain a climactic speech with key expressions. Go tell, and he has risen, in the first, and then go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel, and that he had risen, in the second.

[11 : 28] It's concluded by a response to speech. And they went out, and they said nothing to anyone, in the first. And they went out and preached everywhere, in the second.

It seems that these things are being held alongside each other. We're supposed to see a parallel. And we're also supposed to see a movement up. There's this initial fearful appearance.

Then there's the appearance to Mary Magdalene, the one. And then there's the appearance to the eleven, where they are sent out into the world and commissioned to preach the Gospel. The themes of faith versus fear and unbelief that are throughout Mark's Gospel also come to the foreground at the end, with this emphasis upon the one who has faith, and the way that they should not be fearful.

They should not be people of unbelief. Beyond this, we can also see Exodus themes, Lund argues. Many have identified Exodus themes as structuring the story of Mark, Ricky Watts being a good example of this.

There is an appearance that reminds us, perhaps, of the appearance of God to Moses at the burning bush. There's a commission to go, as Moses was commissioned for the Exodus. There's belief and disbelief as a theme.

[12 : 38] There's picking up serpents. Where else have we seen that before? Moses picks up a serpent. He takes up a serpent, and it's a sign of the Exodus. Hard-heartedness.

That's something that the disciples are challenged for. It's a constant theme within the story of the Exodus, both in reference to Pharaoh and in reference to the people of Israel. And then there's the speaking and performing signs, as Moses did.

And then, finally, an interesting reference. The casting out of seven demons from Mary Magdalene. Lund suggests that there is a parallel, perhaps, here, between the seven nations that are cast out of the land.

In Deuteronomy chapter 7, verse 1, These are a selection of the arguments that Lund makes in his book, and I highly recommend it.

A recurring theme at the beginning here is that of unbelief. They're told this message of Christ's resurrection, and they don't believe it. They're told it, first of all, by Mary Magdalene.

[13 : 53] Then they're told it by the two who see him in another form on the way. And then, finally, Jesus has to appear to them himself and rebuke them for their hard-heartedness. He had told them that he would rise from the dead, and they just had not believed.

This might remind us of other incidents within the Gospel, perhaps particularly those events on the boat, where they had failed to believe in Christ's power over the storm. As we read through those, I noted the parallels between those and the themes of resurrection.

And once again, I think these give supportive evidence to the legitimacy of reading chapter 16 in its full form as part of Mark's text. They are commissioned to go into the world and to preach the Gospel to all the creation.

This is a cosmic message that they're bringing out. And as they do so, they're supposed to declare that he who believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Many have found these verses troubling. The suggestion of baptismal regeneration, for instance. But baptism has always been an essential part of the process of becoming a Christian.

[15 : 00] It doesn't mean that if you're not baptised, you can't be saved. But it does mean, if you're not baptised, that there is something seriously wrong. It's unusual. It's like being a king without having a coronation, or being married without having a ring.

Baptism really is integral to the process of becoming a Christian. And it isn't just something that confirms something that is already the case, although that's part of what it means. It's also an entrance into the reality of what salvation means.

It's an entrance into the life of the body of Christ, the life of the church, the life of the supper. While people are rightly cautious about the idea that baptism is automatically a ticket of salvation, it isn't automatically so.

It requires belief. It is not from Scripture that we get any warrant to downplay baptism. Throughout Scripture, it's spoken of as the washing of regeneration. Peter says that baptism now saves us.

Paul in Romans chapter 6 speaks of us being baptised into Christ and dying and rising again with him. None of this language suggests a magical power of baptism.

[16 : 05] Baptism acting irrespective of the faith or unbelief of the person and just magically zapping them into salvation. That's not what's happening here. In many ways, baptism's relationship to salvation is more like the relationship between a wedding and a marriage.

A wedding is the means by which a faithful couple enter into the union of a marriage. It is a sign of their union and it's a seal of their union together. It's a public manifestation of it.

And baptism is all of these things too. But just as a wedding entered into by unfaithful people would lead to a hollow marriage, so baptism is not a guarantee of salvation apart from faith.

Yet, on the other hand, while people can be saved without baptism, to lack baptism is to lack something very important, like a common-law marriage where there was nothing resembling a wedding.

Jesus promises that signs will follow those who believe. Presumably, we should take this as referring to the disciples in particular. They are the messengers. They are the apostles being sent out with the message of the gospel.

[17 : 08] And as they do so, they will have these signs that confirm that message. Hebrews chapter 2 verses 3 to 4 says, It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders, and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

This speaks as if this stage of the ministry had already been completed. That what Jesus is referring to is specifically the ministry of the apostles, not the ministry of the church more generally.

Although there are ways in which what is true of the ministry of the apostles extends to the rest of the church. In John chapter 14 verse 12, Jesus also declares to his disciples, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do, and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.

And then in Mark chapter 3, 14 to 15, And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach, and have authority to cast out demons.

Jesus is commissioning his disciples here again, giving them authority and power to have signs that confirm the message of the gospel that he has given them. The strange signs that particularly invite discussion are the ones of handling snakes, and of drinking poison.

[18 : 29] The handling of snakes, as I've already noted, reminds us of the story of Moses, and the sign given to him as he preaches in Egypt. But it also anticipates an event with Paul at the end of the book of Acts.

In Acts chapter 28, verses 3 to 6, When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand.

When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live. He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm.

They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

As regards the drinking of poison, Eusebius records the story from Papias, which he received from Philip's daughters, that justice named Barsabbas drank a deadly poison without consequences.

[19 : 31] Justice, of course, along with Matthias, was one of the two that was considered to take the place of Judas in Acts chapter 1. A question to consider.

How do verses 19 to 20 help us to understand the character of the church's mission in relationship to the work of Christ?