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Bart Ehrman, "Mark and the Resurrection", <https://ehrmanblog.org/mark-and-the-resurrection-for-members/>, 04.06.13

Bart Ehrman, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection in Mark", 24.02.2014, <https://ehrmanblog.org/jesus-death-resurrection-mark-members/>; republished 27.11.17

Ehrman, "The Ending of Mark in the King James Bible", 04.02.17, <https://ehrmanblog.org/the-ending-of-mark-in-the-king-james-bible/>

Bart Ehrman, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection in Mark: Another Blast from the Past", 27.11.17, <https://ehrmanblog.org/jesus-death-and-resurrection-in-mark-another-blast-from-the-past/>

QUESTION:

I heard a scholar (I think it was JD Crossan) saying that the absence of a resurrected Jesus in Mark's original gospel reflects the confusion and anxiety that forlorn Jews would have felt after the destruction of the Temple? Do you think this is the case? If so, how does it fit in with the belief (widespread among scholars, I believe) that the accounts of a visibly resurrected Jesus were in circulation long before 70 AD and probably came from Peter, Paul, and Mary M?

RESPONSE:

I don't recall ever hearing this view before - so I'm not sure where you may have read it. I would have to read a fuller exposition of the view to make better sense of it, but off hand, I don't think it's plausible, for several reasons.

First, a lot hinges on what is meant by "the absence of the resurrected Jesus" in Mark. People often get Mark's account wrong by saying that there is no resurrection in Mark. That's absolutely not true. In Mark, Jesus is definitely raised from the dead and is announced as raised from the dead and the women are told that he is going up to Galilee where he is to meet the disciples. The Gospel ends there, without the women telling the disciples (woops!). But Jesus is resurrected, in the body; his tomb is empty; and he is alive again and mobile.

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It's true that there are no resurrection appearances in Mark, but that is almost certainly **not** because Mark has never heard of resurrection appearances. It rather has to do with Mark's own way of telling the story, in two interesting respects: 1) one of the major themes throughout his Gospel is that the disciples of Jesus never "get it" - they never understand who he is or what he says or what must happen to him; and at the end, they still don't get it. In this case they're never even told that he has been raised. 2) Another literary theme in the Gospel has to do with the act of "telling." Throughout the Gospel when Jesus does something fantastic and marvelous, he tells the person to whom he has done it "Don't tell anyone." And immediately the person goes out and tells everyone. Then here at the end, the women are told "Go, tell." And they don't tell a soul....

In any event, I don't think that the absence of resurrection appearances says anything about Jews being upset and at a loss after the destruction of the Temple. This Gospel is not written by a Jew and it is not written for Jews. As I pointed out in yesterday's post, the author does not know Jewish customs (e.g. about hand washing) and even more significant, he assumes that his readers don't know either. If he has to explain to his readers what "all the Jews" do, I think we can assume that he does not think that his readers are Jews.

This Gospel is not about Jews and their sense of loss. It's about, and for, gentile Christians. It is an attempt to show how Jesus could be the messiah of the Jews (though rejected by most of them) if in fact he suffered and died - which was not what was supposed to happen to the messiah. In this Gospel Jesus is not the messiah despite the fact he got crucified. He is the messiah precisely **because** he got crucified. This author is explaining to his gentile readers that the Jewish term messiah has taken on a new meaning, that it refers to the one whose death brings redemption from sin. There weren't any Jews who expected this of a

messiah (there were lots of other expectations of what a messiah would be like and do - but no expectation of one who would be executed by his enemies). But this is what the messiah was, and had to be for Mark. And, of course, this became the standard interpretation of who the messiah was supposed to be among Christians, thanks in no small part to Mark, the other Gospel writers, and Paul before them.

Bart Ehrman, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection in Mark", 24.02.2014, <https://ehrmanblog.org/jesus-death-resurrection-mark-members/>; republished 27.11.17
Here is my final post on Mark, following a literary-historical method. After this post I'll have a reflection or two on the method, and then talk in much briefer fashion about other methods one might use to study the Gospels.

Jesus' Death as the Son of God

It is clear from Mark's Gospel that Jesus' disciples never do come to understand who he is. As we have seen, he is betrayed to the Jewish authorities by one of them, Judas Iscariot. On the night of his arrest, he is denied three times by another, his closest disciple, Peter. All the others scatter, unwilling to stand up for him in the hour of his distress. Perhaps Mark wants his readers to understand that the disciples were shocked when their hopes concerning Jesus as messiah were thoroughly dashed: Jesus did not bring victory over the Romans or restore the kingdom to Israel. For Mark, of course, these hopes were misplaced. Jesus was the Son of God; but he was the Son of God who had to suffer. Until the very end, when Jesus was actually crucified, there was nobody who fully understood

In fact, Mark's narrative may intimate that at the end Jesus himself was in doubt. In Gethsemane, he prays three times not to have to undergo his fate — suggesting perhaps that he thinks there could be another way. And when he finally succumbs to his destiny he appears yet more uncertain, and with good reason: deserted by his own followers, condemned by his own leaders, rejected by his own people, he is publically humiliated, beaten, spat upon, flogged; he is nailed to the cross, and even there he is mocked by passersby, Jewish leaders, and even the two criminals who are crucified along with him. He suffers throughout this entire ordeal in silence, until the very end, when he cries out the words of Scripture: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34; cf. Ps. 22:2). He then utters a loud cry and dies.

Is this a genuine question of the dying Jesus? Does he in fact feel forsaken in the end even by God? Does he not fully understand the reason for his death? These are questions on which readers of the account may disagree. On one point, however, there need be no disagreement. Even though no one else in the Gospel appears to know the significance of Jesus' death, the reader knows. For Mark reveals it by narrating two events that transpire immediately after Jesus breathes his last: the curtain in the Temple is torn in half from top to bottom (15:38), and the Roman centurion confesses Jesus to be the Son of God (15:39).

Without posing the historical question of what "really" happened to the curtain in the Temple (in fact there is no reference in any non-Christian source of it being torn or damaged in any way), one might ask how the reader is supposed to understand Mark's claim that it was ripped asunder. As we have seen, most ancient Jews ascribed a particular holiness to the Temple as the one place in which sacrifices could be offered up to God. This was a sacred place to be revered and respected. The most sacred area within the holy Temple was the Holy of Holies, the square room in whose darkness God's very presence was thought to dwell. This room was so holy that no one could enter, except one day of the year

— on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) — when the Jewish High priest could go behind the thick curtain into the presence of God to perform a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people.

Mark indicates that when Jesus died, the curtain separating this holiest of places from the outside world was torn in half. This appears to mean that God is no longer removed from his people; his holiness is now available to all. No longer do his people need to rely on the Jewish high priest and his sacrifice for their sins on the Day of Atonement. The ultimate sacrifice has been made, voiding the necessity of all others. Jesus, the Son of God, has “given his life as a ransom for many” (10:45). People now have direct access to God, who comes to them in the death of Jesus.

The second occurrence is equally significant. No one throughout this Gospel has fully understood that Jesus is the Son of God who has to suffer. Until now. And strikingly, it is not one of Jesus’ family or followers who understands. It is the Roman centurion who has presided over his crucifixion. This pagan soldier, seeing Jesus die, proclaims, “Surely this man was God’s Son” (15:39). This brings the recognition of Jesus’ true identity around full circle. It was proclaimed at his baptism at the beginning of the Gospel (from heaven); it is now proclaimed at his crucifixion at the end (on earth). Moreover, it is significant who makes the proclamation: a pagan soldier, one who had not been Jesus’ follower. This in itself may intimate what will happen to the proclamation of Jesus as the suffering Son of God down to the time when Mark pens his account: the proclamation in fact will not find fertile soil among Jews, either those who had known Jesus or those who had not. It will be embraced principally by those outside of Judaism, by Gentiles as represented by this Roman centurion. Jesus is the Son of God, rejected by his own people, but acknowledged by the Gentiles. And it is this confession in the suffering and death of the Son of God, Mark reveals, that has brought salvation to the world.

This, however, is not the end of the story.

Jesus The Vindicated Son of God

One of the most fascinating aspects of Mark’s Gospel is the way in which he chose to conclude it. Jesus is buried by a respected leader among the Jews, Joseph of Arimathea (indicating, perhaps, that not all Jews, or even all prominent Jews, were bound to reject him; 15:42-47; cf. 12:28-34). Two women see where he is placed. The next day is the Sabbath. Early in the morning on the day after Sabbath, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome come to provide a more decent burial for the body. But they discover that the stone before the tomb has been rolled away. Going inside, they find a young man in a white robe, who tells them that Jesus has risen. He instructs them to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, and that they are to go there to see him (16:1-7).

Then comes the breathtaking conclusion. The women flee the tomb, and tell nobody anything, “for they were afraid” (16:8). That’s how the story ends.

Christian readers from time immemorial have been shocked and dismayed by this conclusion. How could it end without the disciples hearing that Jesus has been raised? How could they remain in their ignorance? Surely the women must have told someone. In the early church, some copyists of this Gospel were so put off by the ending that they added one of their own, appending twelve additional verses that describe some of Jesus’ appearances to his disciples. Modern scholars are unified, however, in recognizing this

ending as secondary (see Chapter 28). Some have proposed, in its stead, that we assume that the final page of the Gospel somehow got lost (which makes the questionable assumption, among other things, that the Gospel was written on separate pages instead of on a scroll).

These various explanations for Mark's ending, however, may be unnecessary. Mark devoted considerable effort to demonstrating that the disciples never could understand what Jesus meant when he talked about dying and rising again. They never do understand, to the very end. But Mark's readers understand. In fact, they understand a lot of things — about who Jesus really is, about how he was so thoroughly misunderstood, about how his message was to go to the Gentiles, and about what it would mean for those who believe in him to be his disciples.

Bart Ehrman, "Jesus' Death and Resurrection in Mark: Another Blast from the Past", 27.11.17, <https://ehrmanblog.org/jesus-death-and-resurrection-in-mark-another-blast-from-the-past/>

I have been talking about how no one in Mark's Gospel (as opposed to the other Gospels) knows who Jesus is — not his family, his townsfolk, the Jewish leaders, not even his disciples. But the reader knows. Yet even the reader is not given the full scoop until the end. Here is how I explain the matter, in a post from years ago.

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I have been talking about passages of the New Testament that can be found in the King James Bible but were not in the "original" text of the New Testament. I should stress, there are not thousands of these: among the hundreds of thousands of differences among our manuscripts, most are not significantly expanded texts that hugely affect a passage/book. But some are. Among those is the entire ending of the Gospel of Mark, as found in later manuscripts and the KJV. Here is what I say about it in my book Misquoting Jesus.

The Last Twelve Verses of Mark

The next example that I will consider may not be as familiar to the casual reader of the Bible, but it has been highly influential in the history of biblical interpretation and poses comparable problems for the scholar of the textual tradition of the New Testament. This example comes from the Gospel of Mark, and concerns its ending.

In Mark's account of Jesus' passion, we are told that he is crucified and then buried by Joseph of Arimathea, on the day before the Sabbath (15:42-47). On the day after Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and two other women come back to the tomb in order properly to anoint the body (16:1-2). But when they arrive they find that the stone has already been rolled away. Entering into the tomb, they find a young man in a white robe, who tells them "Do not be startled! You are seeking Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has been raised and is not here - see the place where they laid him?" He then instructs the women to tell the disciples that Jesus was proceeding them into Galilee, and that they would see him there, "just as he told you." But the women flee the tomb and say nothing to anyone, "for they were afraid" (16:4-8).

And then come the last twelve verses of Mark in many modern English translations, verses that continue the story. Jesus himself is said to ...

Jesus himself is said to appear to Mary Magdalene, who goes and tells the disciples; but they do not believe her (vv. 9-11). He then appears to two others (vv. 12-14), and finally to the eleven disciples (the "twelve," not including Judas Iscariot) who are gathered together at table. Jesus upbraids them for failing to believe, and then commissions them to go forth and proclaim his gospel, "to the whole creation." Those who believe and are baptized "will be saved," but those who do not "will be condemned." And then come two of the most intriguing verses of the passage:

And these are the signs that will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons in my name; they will speak in new tongues; and they will take up snakes in their hands; and if they drink any poison, it will not harm them; they will place their hands upon the sick and heal them (vv. 17-18).

Jesus is then taken up into heaven, and seated at the right hand of God. And the disciples go forth into the world proclaiming the gospel, their words being confirmed by the signs

that accompany them (vv. 19-20).

It is a terrific passage, mysterious, moving, and powerful. It is one of the passages used by Pentecostal Christians to show that Jesus' followers will be able to speak in unknown "tongues," as happens in their own services of worship; and it is the one (and only) passage used by groups of "Appalachian snake-handlers," who till this day take poisonous snakes up in their hands in order to demonstrate their faith in the words of Jesus, that when doing so they will come to no harm.

But there's one problem. Once again, this passage was not originally in the Gospel of Mark. It was added by a later scribe.

In some ways this textual problem is more disputed than the woman taken in adultery, because without these final verses Mark has a very different, and hard to understand, ending. That doesn't mean that scholars are inclined to accept the verses - as we'll see momentarily, the reasons for taking them to be an addition are solid, almost indisputable. But scholars debate what the genuine ending of Mark actually was, given the circumstance that this ending found in many English translations (though usually marked as inauthentic) and in later Greek manuscripts is not the original.

The evidence that shows these verses were not original to Mark is similar in kind to that for the woman taken in adultery, and again I don't need to go into all the details here. It is absent from our two oldest and best manuscripts of Mark's Gospel, along with other important witnesses; the writing style varies from what we find elsewhere in Mark; the transition between this passage and the one preceding is hard to understand (e.g., Mary Magdalene is introduced in v. 9 as if she hadn't been mentioned yet, even though she is discussed in the preceding verses; there is another problem with the Greek that makes the transition even more awkward); and there are a large number of words and phrases in the passage that are not elsewhere found in Mark. In short, the evidence is sufficient to convince virtually all textual scholars that these verses are an addition to Mark.

But without them, doesn't the story end rather abruptly? Notice what happens when these verses are taken away! The women are told to inform the disciples that Jesus will precede them to Galilee and meet them there; but they, the women, flee the tomb and say nothing to anyone, "for they were afraid." And that's where the Gospel ends.

Obviously scribes thought the ending was too abrupt. The women told no one? Then, did the disciples never learn of the resurrection? And didn't Jesus himself ever appear to them? How could that be the ending??? To resolve the problem, scribes added an ending.

Some scholars agree with the scribes in thinking that 16:8 is too abrupt an ending for a Gospel. As I indicated, it is not that these scholars believe the final twelve verses in our later manuscripts were the original ending - they know that that's not the case. But they think that possibly the last page of Mark's Gospel, one in which Jesus actually did meet the disciples in Galilee, was somehow lost, and that all of our copies of the Gospel go back to this one truncated manuscript, without the last page.

And that's entirely possible. But it is also possible, in the opinion of yet other scholars, that

Mark did indeed mean to end his Gospel with 16:8. It certainly is a shocker of an ending. The disciples never learn the truth of Jesus' resurrection because the women never tell them. One reason for thinking that could be how Mark ended his Gospel is that some such ending coincides so well with other motifs throughout his Gospel. As students of Mark have long noticed, the disciples never do seem to "get it" in this Gospel (unlike some of the other Gospels). They are repeatedly said not to understand Jesus (6:51-52; 8:21) and when Jesus tells them on several occasions that he must suffer and die, they manifestly fail to comprehend (8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:33-40). Maybe, in fact, they never did come to understand (unlike Mark's readers, who can understand who Jesus really is from the very beginning). Also, it is interesting to note that throughout Mark, when someone comes to understand something about Jesus, he orders him to silence - and yet often the person ignores the order and spreads the news (e.g., 1:43-45). How ironic that when the women at the tomb are told, not to be silent, but to speak - they also ignore the order and are silent!

In short, Mark may well have intended to bring his reader up short with this abrupt ending - a clever way to make the reader stop, take a faltering breath, and ask: What??