

## Who was first? Mary Magdalene, Peter and the Ending of Mark

J Gertrud Tönsing  
Biblical and Ancient Studies  
UNISA

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### Abstract

*This article discusses one of the most perplexing questions in textual criticism – the wide variety of endings for the gospel of Mark. The most reliable early manuscripts end at verse 8, but this is a very strange ending, and other endings seem to have been added later: the shorter and the longer ending. The article discusses various hypotheses about whether an original ending was lost or whether this ending was deliberate and concludes that Mark decided to end this way because of conflicting versions of the Easter story circulating in his community: One was the early traditional version, probably proclaimed by the Jerusalem apostles and taken up by Paul, that Peter was the first one to see the risen Christ. The other was more controversial and had implications for questions of authority and leadership in the church: the testimony that Mary Magdalene, or several women, were first. Mark chose to allow the women the place of first witnesses to the empty tomb, but to leave open the question of who had the first encounter with the risen Christ. The different factions were then free to choose their own ending. As the empty tomb was not an integral part of the Petrine resurrection narrative, Mark's version did not undermine this early Easter account, but opened the way to integrate the women's story in official Christian tradition.*

**Keywords:** Ending of Mark; Mark 16; Mark 16:8; Mary Magdalene; Resurrection; Empty tomb; Easter

### Introduction

Few questions in New Testament studies are as puzzling as the question of the ending of Mark. Ever since textual criticism became a serious academic discipline, the question about what could have been the original ending of Mark has raged. There are basically five different endings to Mark found in the available manuscripts:

- 1) The Ending at Chapter 16:8, with the words “for they were afraid”.
- 2) A longer ending, printed in most Bibles, Mark 16:9–20
- 3) A shorter ending, printed in some Bibles in brackets or in the footnotes, but without verse numbers.
- 4) A combination of the shorter and the longer endings
- 5) The longer ending with a further addition, the so-called “Freer logion”.

Most scholars are in agreement that the additional endings are probably all not original. This can be deduced both from textual evidence and from the style and vocabulary in these endings, which are not typical of Mark. Still, there is no consensus as to why the

gospel might end in 16:8, with some arguing that an original ending got lost and others offering various theories why the abrupt ending served the purposes of the author of the earliest gospel. Older commentaries usually argue for a lost ending. In more recent years, scholars have tended to argue for a purposeful ending at 16:8 and have proposed various possible reasons. This debate is not yet settled. In these debates, various theories have been considered but seemingly not yet the one proposed in this article, that Mark leaves it open because of conflicting versions of the resurrection story in circulation in the early church. These were probably the version related by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, which names Peter as first witness, and the alternative version that knew of the witness of women, and particularly Mary Magdalene.

### Textual evidence

The vast majority of available documents support the longer ending of Mark, which became part of the dominant church tradition until today. However, in textual criticism, it is not quantity that counts but the age of the manuscripts and the spread of a variant between different “Text families”. There are no papyri which contain the ending of Mark which are older than 300 AD (Riddle 2018: 35). The earliest and best manuscripts from the Fourth Century are Sinaiticus (Aleph) and Vaticanus (B), and these both end Mark at 16:8. Riddle argues that in the fourth Century there was a dispute about the ending of Mark and that there are indications that the scribes of both these documents were aware of alternative endings existing but declined to use them (Riddle 2018:41). He includes photos of the documents to illustrate his point. Sinaiticus fills out the end of the line and the next line with a decorative pattern, as if to discourage any future scribe from adding an alternative ending (Riddle 2018, 42). The ending of Mark in the document Vaticanus is also unusual. It leaves blank not only the rest of the column but also the adjacent column, which would usually have had the beginning of Luke. It seems as if this scribe made the decision to end at verse 8 but unlike the scribe of Sinaiticus, was unsure of this and so opened the way for future scribes to add the correct ending (Riddle 2018, 44). Wallace points out that the gap that was left would not have been large enough for the longer ending we have today, so a shorter ending may have been in view (Wallace 2008:17).

Other early witnesses to the “abrupt” ending are found in various text families and from many different geographical areas, including old Latin, Syriac, Armenian and Georgian manuscripts (Nel 2020:2). There are also various witnesses from early Church Fathers about Mark’s Ending. It seems that Clement of Alexandria and Origen did not know the longer ending, while Eusebius and Jerome (early and later fourth century), who did know of its existence, expressly stated that it was missing from almost all the Greek documents known to them (Nel 2020, 2).

The shorter ending does not have many documentary witnesses, only codex Bobiensis from the fourth or fifth century (Collins 2007:802), and no scholar has argued for its originality. It is not recognised in most mainline Christian traditions but read officially in the Ethiopian church (Grundmann 1980:449). The longer ending does have some ancient documentary witnesses in different text families (Thomas 1983:409), so some scholars argue for the originality or at least canonicity of the longer ending. There is early evidence for the existence of the longer ending in early church fathers, such as a possible quote by Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* (c150) and a

definite quote by Irenaeus in his treatise *Against Heresies* (c AD 175–189) (Riddle 2018:36). Riddle quotes other possible early supporters such as Hippolytus, and the church critics Celsus and Porphyry to argue that the long ending is attested early (Riddle 2018:37). Indeed, many scholars concur that the longer ending is ancient, at the latest from the early second century, but some argue it was not composed as the ending of Mark but was rather an ancient catechetical document, giving a summary of resurrection appearances (Grundmann 1980:451). An Armenian text from AD 989 ascribes it to the presbyter Ariston, who could be identical with someone with the name of Aristion mentioned by Papias (Schweizer 1968:217). The document *Washingtoniensis* from the fifth century contains this ending plus another addition, called the Freer Logion. This is largely regarded as a late second or third century addition to soften the criticism of the disciples in verse 14 (Nel 2020:2).

The longer ending on first glance seems to be simply a “gospel harmony”, and it has been labelled as such (Schniewind 1968:214), but there are definite differences from the other gospel accounts, particularly the account of the lack of faith when the two disciples on the road shared their experience. So it is probably an independent attempt to summarise the resurrection traditions. In this article, I will argue that it represents a new “unifying” version of the resurrection story for the church after the conflicts around the different narratives. While this has brought some unity, the question of whether it should be added to Mark’s gospel remained contentious for the next few centuries.

Riddle criticises the heavy emphasis on the two early documents over against a long, cumulative church tradition which sees the longer ending as authoritative. He quotes Nicholas Lunn in questioning why these two documents, which “long lay unused by the church”, should be so important as to override the centuries-old consensus that this ending is canonical (Riddle 2018:54). Whether something that is not original can be canonical is a different question, which will be briefly reflected on later in this article. This question is also relevant for the passage about the woman caught in adultery, John 8:1–11, and for countless passages added in later to Old Testament prophets. Most Bibles print these passages with a text note rather than relegating the whole passage to a footnote, as was done with the long ending, for example, in the 1952 edition of the RSV (Riddle 2018:54). Regarding the question of originality, the text-critical rule of thumb that agreement of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus is very strong external evidence applies here. Of course, the internal evidence should also be weighed.

It is fairly clear that the version of Mark that Matthew and Luke used ends at verse 8. They both follow Mark’s story closely up until verse 8 and then diverge very widely.

## **Content changes**

There is much in the content of the longer ending to suggest it was not composed by Mark and also not deliberately composed as an ending for Mark’s gospel, but was an independent document later attached to the gospel. The argument by Rienecker that Mark himself composed the longer ending at a later date when some copies without the ending were already circulating does not have much plausibility (1962:29). There are just too many stylistic differences.

Arguments for the longer ending being an independent document include the following:

- 1) There is a new introduction to the resurrection with the words, “Now when he rose” (9).
- 2) There is no mention of the empty tomb.
- 3) There is no attempt to reconcile the new ending with the words “they told no-one”.
- 4) Mary Magdalene is introduced as if she had not already been an actor, and there is no mention of the other two women.
- 5) There is no mention of Galilee or of the instruction to tell the disciples to go there.

In general, there is a lack of any organic connection with the story that has gone before (Nel 2020:3).

### **Style and vocabulary shift**

There is also a very “abrupt style shift” (Nel 2020:3) in sentence structure, vocabulary and narrative method.

- 1) A dramatic story-telling style becomes a dry listing of events.
- 2) There is no direct speech until the formulaic commission in verses 15 and 16.
- 3) There is no portrayal of emotions. Emotions are mentioned but not described: “she went and told them as they mourned and wept” (10). This is different from “They were amazed” (5) and “trembling and astonishment had come upon them...they were afraid” (8).

There is also a large shift in sentence structure and vocabulary. This has been demonstrated in various studies. There are sixteen words which occur nowhere else in Mark (Williams 2010:405), and common words in Mark are absent in this passage (Williams 2010:406). Grammatically also Mark has ways of constructing Greek sentences which deviate from the classical Greek usage. All Mark’s idiosyncratic uses of Greek are missing in the passage (Williams 2010:407). It is also strange that Jesus is not mentioned by name. The referent for the “he” in verse 9 is obviously Jesus. But the last “he” in the passage beforehand was the young man in white.

The internal evidence also speaks clearly against a Markan origin for the longer ending. There is at present an overwhelming consensus that the only copy of Mark we have access to ended at 16:8, but there is still substantial disagreement on the question of whether this was Mark’s intention.

### **A Lost ending?**

While most scholars are agreed that the texts after verse 8 are all not Markan, there is disagreement about whether the ending at verse 8 was intentional. Many scholars, particularly in earlier decades of the Twentieth Century but some still today, argued for a lost ending. They argue that ending this way cannot have been Mark’s intention. The ending must have been lost, or Mark was prevented from finishing his gospel by death or arrest (Hargreaves 1965:322). They do acknowledge that if it was lost, this must have been early, before copies circulated widely and reached Matthew and Luke. No plausible theory has been proposed as to why people would not have noticed a lost

ending much earlier and found a way to reconstruct it. Chenoweth argues that initially a written source had lower value than oral history, and so there was no incentive to repair a damaged ending when people still had the knowledge to do so (Chenoweth 2019:28,31). Yet this is difficult to accept with Mark having had sufficient authority to be used extensively by both Matthew and Luke.

Some of the arguments for the “Lost ending” hypothesis are the following:

- 1) Mark calls his document the “Good News of Jesus Christ”. Ending it with an account of fear and disobedience and without the appearance of Christ himself makes little sense (Stein 2008:79,90).
- 2) Mark sets up the expectation of a meeting of Christ with Peter (who is named individually) and the disciples in Galilee, but does not recount it. All other promises of Jesus in Mark are fulfilled, except the parousia (Stein 2008:79,90).
- 3) The final sentence seems strangely chopped off. Some scholars have argued that the gospel cannot have ended with the Greek word *gar*, which, according to Kevin (1926:85), gives the equivalent of the English, “They were afraid, for--”.

Some scholars argue for an accidental loss, most probably because the last leaf of the papyrus was torn off before it could be copied (Kevin 1926:86). This would explain the very abrupt ending with a grammatically strange construction. Others have argued that Mark could have been prevented from finishing it by circumstance, death or arrest (Barclay 1975:5). But as it is unlikely that Mark worked completely alone, it should have been easy to reconstruct a lost ending. Another theory was that Mark’s Galilean ending was suppressed in favour of the Jerusalem appearances of John and Luke (Bacon in Kevin 1926:85). But this would raise many new questions, such as why then Matthew was not edited as well, and why in the end a Galilean ending was added to John. It would not have needed much editing to leave out Galilee as place without cutting the whole ending (Kevin 1926:86).

There are also debates about what this lost ending could have looked like. Kevin argued that it must have contained an appearance to Peter in Galilee. He refers to Paul’s resurrection account in 1 Cor. 15 and states:

We must keep in mind that St. Paul expressly declares Peter to have first seen the risen Lord, and that that statement in Corinthians is the earliest tradition in the New Testament. That is, that the Galilean appearances are primary and that the Jerusalem appearances of Mt. and Jn. as first to the Magdalene are secondary (Kevin 1926:89).

A similar argument is made by Croy, who speaks of the “mutilation” of the gospel and argues for resurrection appearances in Galilee in the lost ending (Collins 2007:798). The question of which tradition could have been primary will be discussed later, but indeed it is likely that the “Petrine” version was the most widely disseminated tradition and would be the most probable content of a lost ending. Still, the “lost ending” hypothesis raises as many questions as it answers.

Stein argues against modern exegetes who argue that the ending was appropriate for Mark, saying it is clear that many scribes and ancient readers, starting with Luke and

Matthew, did not see verse 8 as the intended ending of the story, and the many attempts to complete Mark shows that they were dissatisfied with this ending. He argues that it is unlikely that we would understand Mark's intentions better than his early readers did (Stein 2008:92). Stein does not attempt to give a reason why so many documents did not try to complete Mark but left the open ending intact, which seems to indicate they understood the abrupt ending as the intended one. He also does not comment on the fact that the long ending does not seem to have been composed as an ending to Mark.

### **Intentional Ending**

Scholarship in the last decades has moved more and more away from the "lost" ending hypothesis towards arguing that Mark intended to end the gospel in this way. The fact that there is a large spread of documents well into the fourth century and later that end Mark at verse 8 must mean that people understood this to have been Mark's intention and perhaps even still knew the reason for this. An early loss would have been noticed and would probably have been rectified sooner. It is unlikely that Mark was not in any way in conversation with others about his gospel writing, and even if not, others would have known the version of the resurrection story he most likely would have told. There have also been studies on the use of "gar" which have shown up that such an ending is highly unusual but not impossible (Thomas 1983:413). The fact that the longer ending does not seem to have been deliberately composed as an ending to Mark also adds weight to the argument that initially people would have understood Mark's intention.

There are many theories about why Mark could have intentionally ended the way he did.

- 1) There is no need to add anything beyond the proclamation, "He has risen".
- 2) There is the desire to draw the reader in to proclaim Christ where both the male and the female disciples failed.
- 3) Mark's purpose is to demonstrate not human failure but the faithfulness of God
- 4) The readers would know that the women were ultimately faithful, and the resurrection was proclaimed. The readers knew how the story continues; therefore, there was no need to tell it.
- 5) Ending with fear dramatises the statement, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom".
- 6) Mark had the intention of writing a sequel like Acts, which would have begun with the encounter with the risen Christ.
- 7) Mark wanted the early Christians not to focus on the glory of the risen Christ but rather on the reality of the need to take up the cross.

Some commentators argue that Mark's gospel comes to a climax with the proclamation of the resurrection and that this completes it. Grundmann (1980:450) argues that it needs no more. Lohmeyer (1967:359) and Marxsen (1969:85) argue that verse 7 points ahead to the Parousia and is not a promise to meet the risen Christ. This view of verse 7 and linked with it verse 14:28 as pointing to the parousia and not a resurrection appearance has generally been discredited (Stein 2008a:732) and will not be further discussed. Ferda (2019:36) notes that had Mark ended with verse 7, no-one would have thought it strange. It is the ending with fear and silence that is difficult to understand.

Quite a few scholars argue that the open, unsatisfactory ending is a deliberate attempt to draw in the reader. Hester (1995:65) argues that the “narrative breakdown *demands* the actual reader's involvement in rescuing the story”. The reader's expectations are disrupted, and this is a way to “shock them out of complacency into action” (Hester 1995:65). Pickett (2005:444) argues that the aim of the resurrection narrative is “not to convey information but to impel those who hear the story to become faithful followers of Jesus”. A similar point is made by Williamson (1983:286): “... this unfinished story puts the ball in the reader's court”. Questions have been raised regarding whether this narrative style would have been familiar to ancient readers. Knox in Ferda argues it would have broken story-telling conventions from the first century (Ferda 2019:45).

Ferda (2019:45) argues that the gospel ends first in the failure of the male disciples and then the failure of the more faithful female disciples, and this is Mark's purpose because he wants to emphasise the faithfulness of God. Spencer argues that there is an emphasis throughout the gospel of Mark on hardening of hearts and denial (2007:277), and draws the parallel to the failure of John Mark, as portrayed in Acts 15:38. The argument is that what Mark and Peter had in common was a failure of discipleship, and this is why the gospel ends in failure (2007:271). Dewey (2006:29) and Webb (2008:149) argue in a similar line: Mark's message is that human failure is the beginning of true discipleship. Horsley argues that Mark points out the failures of the disciples in order to lead the church away from revering authority figures and towards the movement's egalitarian beginnings (2001, 96). Undoubtedly the failure of discipleship is a repeated theme in Mark, but one would have expected some final climax on the faithfulness of God in this case.

It is clear that Mark's readers know that the news of the resurrection ultimately was proclaimed. The women stayed silent for a time but did ultimately tell someone, or else there would not have been an Easter faith. Kartzow (2010:7–8) uses the category of “gossip” to analyse the way the women's witness was portrayed in the Easter stories, the “empty talk” spoken of in Luke 24:11. She argues that there is an irony embedded at the end of Mark and a gender stereotype, as the logic is that “women could not hold their tongue” in spite of the fact that they were afraid (Kartzow 2010:7–8). Heil (1992:349) sees the reference to Galilee as the key, as Galilee was the place “where Jesus' gospel of God's kingdom could not be kept secret”. Breytenbach (2021:24) argues that that the “solution to Mark's macrotheme is not narrated but instead predicted”. He argues for Mark 13:24–27 as the “actual conclusion” of the gospel of Mark (Breytenbach 2021:24). Whinton (2016:286) argues that Mark's hearers would have understood the sentence as, “they said nothing to anyone except the disciples and Peter”, but nevertheless for an oral performance this would still have been a pessimistic ending, an anti-climax raising many emotions. (see also Hurtado 2009:122).

Sabin reads Mark with the background of wisdom traditions, pointing out that in the narrative Jesus often lifts up women and that they are portrayed as wise over against the weakness and folly of the male disciples (1998:150). She interprets the fear as “holy fear” (Sabin 1998:162) and argues that Mark in effect ends his gospel by dramatising the unifying theme of the Wisdom writings, that “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” (Sabin 1998:165). However, most readers would probably see the women as having failed rather than as having become wise.



Another reason is mentioned as a possibility by Schniewind (1968:213): Mark had the intention of writing a sequel like Acts, which would have begun with an encounter with the risen Christ. Of course, this is not impossible, but it would still make the ending of volume one with fear and silence unusual. Hare (1996:223) mentions as a possible reason that Mark wanted Christians to make the crucified Christ rather than the glory of the risen Jesus the focus of their devotion. Then one could ask why he mentioned the resurrection at all, and not, as John did, made the moment of crucifixion the moment of exaltation.

None of the answers above are impossible, though many have been disputed (Stein 2008b:735). It is beyond the scope of this article to critique them all in detail. Instead, I want to argue for a much simpler solution to the problem, one that Von Campenhausen already hinted at in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the conflict between the two different Easter traditions, of Peter and of the women. According to Grundmann (1980:443), von Campenhausen argued that Mark is trying to combine two competing traditions to show that the women's witness does not negate the status of the apostles as those first encountering the risen Christ. Von Campenhausen also argues that the empty tomb narrative is the earliest because the tradition of the resurrection on the "third day" (1 Cor 15:4), a tradition which formed the basis of early liturgical observance, cannot have been linked with Galilee (Grundmann 1980:444). The disciples would not have travelled on the Sabbath. It is interesting that von Campenhausen's line of argument has not had many supporters, perhaps because it does not then make sense that Mark did not report the appearance of the risen Christ to the male disciples as first witnesses. In what follows, I shall argue that it is indeed the conflict between the male and the female disciples that lies behind the strange ending of the gospel of Mark.

### **Probability of an early Passion and Resurrection story**

It shall be argued here that there was possibly an early fairly fixed account of the passion of Christ, which circulated prior to Mark's gospel (Grundmann 1980:8). Whether this was written, or an often-repeated oral tradition is immaterial for this argument; still, it could have had some authority for both Mark and John, who agree in broad strokes on the outline and sequence of events of the passion story. It is difficult to imagine that this story did not end with an account of the resurrection, as this was the central kerygma of the new Christian faith. Paul quotes what seems to be already a fairly fixed tradition in 1 Cor 15:3–5 as something that he "received". This speaks in almost creedal language of Jesus' death for our sins, of his burial and then of his being raised on the third day and being seen by Peter, and then by the other disciples. It is likely that this was a simple summary of a longer narrative tradition. This tradition has no mention of an empty tomb or of women witnesses. That Paul does not mention the women does not necessarily mean he was unaware of the existence of such a tradition. Even so, it was irrelevant to his purposes of making the resurrection believable, as women had no legal status as witnesses (Scholtz 2021:303). Paul's account lists the appearance to Peter first, without expressly saying he was first: "...and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve" (1 Cor 15:5). But Peter was the first witness to be "credible" in the society which was to receive the proclamation. He was the first witness one needed to quote if one wanted others to believe in the resurrection story.



This would have been the version most often proclaimed publicly, side-lining the less presentable alternative based on the women's witness.

It is likely that an early resurrection story would have begun with an appearance to Peter in Galilee. There was probably no narrative of an empty tomb in this version, as this would have been impossible without including the women. A reference to Galilee appears in both Mark and Matthew and also in the addition to John's gospel, John 21. Luke simplifies the story and makes all appearances happen in and around Jerusalem, which fits in well with the purposes of Luke. Nevertheless, Luke also mentions Galilee in the words of the angel: "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee" (24:6). It seems Luke could not leave out the reference to Galilee entirely. There does not seem to be a good reason why a Galilee tradition could be a later addition. Marxsen, who argues for verse 7 being a reference to the Parousia, quotes Bultmann, who suggests that there was an old tradition of the disciple's flight to Galilee, which was later deleted and changed to the disciples having been "sent" (Marxsen 1969:82–83). He also quotes Bousset in a footnote, as he argues for such a tradition and quotes John 16:32 in support of it. Hooker (1991:386) argues that Mark implies through mentioning Galilee that the disciples have to begin again and are summoned in Galilee to forgiveness and renewal. Marxsen argues that all the Galilee traditions are dependent on Mark 16:7. Yet he does not explain why the John 21 version is then so different from the narrative in Matthew (Marxsen 1969:82–83). It is clear that if Peter was the first witness, a return to Galilee would have been natural. The Galilee story in John 21 seems to capture the spirit of returning to normality, which only makes sense if this is the first appearance. In combination with the knowledge of the announcement to the women, a return to Galilee would seem like a lack of faith and a cowardly "flight". This is why the empty tomb could have been excluded in the early traditional version.

It is extremely unlikely that the story of the appearance to Peter first was the only early oral version. If it was, the likelihood that a story of women as witnesses would have gained credibility is very slim. Kevin states in the quote in a previous section above that the Pauline passage is the oldest written record of the resurrection, and that this must mean that the Petrine tradition is primary and that of Mary Magdalene secondary (Kevin 1926:89). However, in a context that was hostile to women's witness and women's leadership, it is unlikely that the female version would have gained canonical status if it had not been known to have a basis in historical experience. Roskam argues that there was no empty tomb narrative prior to Mark and shows that the addition of the women in Mark 15 has strong signs of Markan redaction. He argues that Mark chose women as witnesses because anointing the dead was a task for women (Roskam 2004:102). He does not discuss the issue that women were not seen as credible witnesses. Pesch argues that the tradition about the early visit to the tomb on the first day of the week was a later adaptation to liturgical tradition. But he gives no explanation regarding where this liturgical tradition could have come from (Pesch 1977:550). It is unlikely that a tradition of the Sunday morning resurrection could have its basis in an appearance in Galilee, as the disciples could not have reached Galilee by Sunday morning. Schniewind points out that the empty tomb must have been part of early tradition, as even Paul explicitly speaks of Jesus' burial in 1 Cor 15:4, and the question of what had happened to the body would have been obvious (Schniewind 1968:212). It is difficult to see how a much later tradition would have gained

acceptance if it involved the witness of women, particularly the witness of the controversial woman Mary Magdalene. The tradition that the Christian faith's central tenet was first attested to by women was an embarrassment that one would not proclaim loudly to the world (Evans 1989:531), particularly not the Jewish world. Nevertheless, ultimately it could not be silenced. Scholz argues, "their lack of credibility makes their witness more credible (Scholtz 2021:303)."<sup>1</sup>

### Mary Magdalene as earliest witness

All gospel writers agree on the fact that Mary Magdalene was among the women who followed Jesus all the way to the cross. She is always named first among the women, a clear sign that she was the acknowledged leader amongst the women disciples (Maisch 1998:11). Except in Paul's account, which excludes all women witnesses, she is named in all Easter narratives as one of the first witnesses to the resurrection. Matthew, John, and the long ending of Mark (which could represent a later church consensus) name her as having seen the risen Christ. John and the longer ending of Mark name her as the initial sole witness. The non-canonical *Gospel of Peter* names her "with her women friends" (*G Pet* 50–51), a clear sign of her leadership among the women (Atwood 1993:110). If this later gospel is dependent on the canonical gospels, it could show that it is trying to acknowledge the importance of Mary while not leaving out the others entirely. Crossan's argument that this version pre-dates the synoptics has not had much support (Evans 2000:531) and will not be discussed here.

It is fairly likely that Mary Magdalene indeed was the first person to report on an encounter with the risen Christ. Overwhelming and novel religious experiences are more likely to happen to individuals. Afterwards, other people might report the same. It is likely that other women then had their own experiences, though exactly which women were involved is no longer clear. The use of "we" in John 20:2 may be a sign that John deliberately leaves out the other women (Atwood 1993:110), but it may also show that the first witness, Mary, initially spoke to the other women, who then also came to the tomb, something the evangelist leaves out. All three synoptics mention another Mary, but Mark speaks of Salome (16:1) and Luke of Joanna (24:10). The inclusion of the gospel of John in the canon and the longer ending of Mark probably represent later consensus that Mary Magdalene's role could not be denied. That Mary is mentioned alone in the longer ending of Mark could simply be the influence of John, but is more likely to show that her claim to be first was ultimately acknowledged.

What is known of Mary Magdalene? The likelihood is that she was unmarried, as she is not called "wife of" or "mother of" but is named after her place of origin (Maisch 1998:5). She was known as the "woman from Magdala" (Maisch 1998:2). This probably already made her controversial, as this meant she did not fit into society's expectations. She is always named first when the women disciples are mentioned, which implies that she was the leader of the group. (Luke 8:2, 24:10; Mark 15:40,47, 16:1; Matt 27:56,61; 28:1). The only exception is in the gospel of John, who first mentions Mary the mother of Jesus as being under the cross (John 19:25) but gives Mary Magdalene sole place as witness of the resurrection.

<sup>1</sup> In the original: "deur hulle ongeloofwaardigheid word hulle getuie meer geloofwaardig". (Scholz 2021:386)

Luke writes that the women disciples, including Mary Magdalene, provided for Jesus and his followers “out of their means” (8:3). This means that Mary had a stable economic income, possibly some land. According to Maisch (1998:49), Galilean women could own land, but it could also have been owned by a sympathetic family member. Somehow, she had the means to provide for herself and give to others. The popular stereotype that she was a prostitute has no biblical basis and probably derives from the process of fusing her with the woman who anointed Jesus, who is identified by John as Mary of Bethany (12:3) and by Luke as a “sinner” (7:37). She became the model of the penitent sexual sinner, a useful image for the church and a very effective way to neutralise her importance as a disciple (Haskins 1994:84). This identification with the anointers might have been helped because Mary Magdalene from the Easter morning story was also associated with a jar of ointment (Mark 16:1). According to Leloup (2002:11) this was a popular early way of depicting Mary Magdalene and was in gentile circles a sign of being a priestess. Leloup also emphasises that Luke does not use the name for prostitute but rather a word for a transgressor of the Jewish law (Leloup 2002:7). The identification of her with the other anointing women was still unknown by early church fathers but ultimately fixed by the Magdalene homilies of Gregory I (Atwood 1993:148–49). Luke 8:2 and the longer ending of Mark (16:9) speak of her as having been healed from “seven demons”. Possibly, this was a mental illness she was cured from, (which might be a reason she never married) but seeing as she was respected among the women and economically productive, it could not have been a debilitating illness. It could alternatively have been her unwillingness to marry and fit the stereotypes of society that got her branded as a demoniac. This is how the 2018 movie “Mary Magdalene” portrays it (Davis 2018), and this could be the case. Healing would have come through Jesus recognising her as independent and as a competent disciple capable of grasping spiritual truths. For her to submit to a man’s authority, even if it was a controversial rabbi, could have been seen as evidence of “healing” by the society, but this remains speculation. Reminding people of her past as a “demoniac” would have been an easy way of disparaging her in a setting where her role could not be sidelined. Particularly, the association with “seven demons” made it easier to identify her with a great sinner. Lyons-Pardue (2020:64–65) points out that in other places demon possession was not seen as a moral failing, but that in the case of Mary, until today there are commentators who see it as detrimental to her character even after the healing. If Mary Magdalene was already an uncomfortable figure who would not conform to expectations, this would make the allegation that a risen Jesus would appear to her first even more scandalous. Critics of Christianity saw it as grounds to attack the new faith (an indirect witness to the primacy of this tradition). For example, Celsus said that Christianity depends on the witness of a “hysterical woman” (Setzer 1997:261).

Extra-canonical documents portray her as an important disciple who was particularly close to Jesus and a leader in the early church (Schaberg 2002:83). She plays an “outstanding, outspoken and leading role” in many Gnostic documents (Atwood 1993:186), and several mention the special love of Jesus for Mary Magdalene, for example the *Gospel of Philip* (63,32–64,5) and the *Gospel of Mary* (18:14). She is portrayed as asking many questions and possessing deep spiritual insight throughout *Pistis Sophia* (Marjanen 1996:170). She is a woman who has

“understood completely” in the *Dialogue of the Saviour* (139:11–13). She has the ability to console the disciples (*G Mar* 9:14–22) and is even portrayed as the “companion” of Jesus in the *Gospel of Philip* (59:6–11). Nowhere is there evidence of the special relationship being in any way sexual, as is often implied in popular literature about Mary Magdalene (De Boer 2002:122). Several documents portray a conflict between Mary and the male disciples, most prominently between her and Peter, e.g., *G Thom* 114, *G Mar* 17:10–22, *P Soph* 58:11–14. This is often attributed to jealousy from the male disciples of her special status (Marjanen 1996:115). This could point to a tension in the early church between their followers (Setzer 1997:260; Schüssler Fiorenza 1987:305). However, it is not easy to draw a direct correlation between this portrayed conflict and its possible historical background, as the roles of the disciples vary widely from document to document (Marjanen 1996:30–31), and some documents seem to exclude other women from the leadership role accorded to Mary Magdalene (De Boer 2002:121).

Marjanen (1996:20) questions whether the conflicts depicted in the Gnostic documents have historical roots, as it has its “only explicit witnesses in second and third century documents, whereas no tangible traces of it can be found in sources of the first century”. Yet it could be argued that the strange ending of Mark is indeed tangible evidence of such a conflict, and that the many varied Easter accounts are a sign of the struggle to get the role of the women but particularly Mary Magdalene acknowledged in the early church (Schaberg 2002:86).

### **Mark’s attempt to bring the narratives together**

If the hypothesis that the tensions between the two narratives lie behind Mark’s ending is correct, how does this ending deal with the tensions and how does it try to resolve them and open up a way to a new agreed Easter narrative? Mark is traditionally regarded as the spokesperson for the disciple Peter, and most date the gospel as written not long after the martyrdom of the Apostle (Stein 2008a:13–14). It was probably important at this stage for Mark not to undermine Peter’s standing, nor insult his memory by the implication that he was not the first to see the risen Christ. But it must have been clear to Mark that the side-lining of the women’s narrative was no longer tenable in the early church. It is likely that he had many different narratives to reconcile. These could have included stories about various encounters with Jesus, about the empty tomb and even angels. He chooses the elements he relates very carefully, so as not to undermine the Petrine account but to open up space for the alternative narrative. He leaves the ending open deliberately. People in his community probably knew both endings and could then choose their own way to complete the narrative. He was possibly convinced that Mary was first to see the risen Christ but was not free to say that at that stage.

I would like to argue that the first eight verses in Mark 16 are carefully constructed to open up the way to a new consensus about the Easter story in the early church. It ultimately vindicated Mary’s claim to be first witness while lessening her claim to leadership and authority because of this. That this passage is constructed by Mark and not simply taken over from tradition is supported by commentators who show the awkward break between Chapters 15 and 16, with a repeat of the women’s names, and the long temporal indicator at the beginning of Chapter 16. This, according to Evans

and Taylor, seems to indicate that “this pericope has been drawn from a cycle of tradition distinct from much of what underlies chaps 14-15. The evangelist has constructed the narrative on the ‘basis of tradition’ (Evans 2000:530). Collins (2007:795) also argues that the beginning of the passage is a typically Markan construction.

The following details in the passage show how Mark integrated the women’s story without undermining the Petrine account:

- 1) He mentions Mary first but not alone. This lessens the focus on the dispute around Mary’s individual leadership and authority (Maisch 1998:15). Interestingly, it is just two women who witness the burial but three who come to the tomb in the morning. Of these, Salome is replaced by Joanna in Luke 24:10, another possible sign that the other witnesses were not unambiguously first.
- 2) He does not speak of an angel but of a “young man” in a “white robe”. This alludes to the fact that in many of the resurrection accounts, there are figures not immediately recognised as Jesus. Some of the women probably reported on a white-robed figure who could have been an angel or Christ himself. Matthew changes this to “angel”; Luke has “two men”.
- 3) Peter is given special mention by the white-clad young man, which sets up the expectation of a special encounter with him in Galilee. The readers would know this story well, although it is not told. This takes away the suspicion that Mark in any way wants to denigrate Peter’s memory. The verse in 14:28, which fits awkwardly into its context (Nineham 1963:445), was probably also inserted by Mark to lead up to this announcement. Pesch (1977:380) argues that 14:28 must be original, as the word about scattering is balanced with the word of restoration. It is difficult then to explain, though, why Peter does not seem to hear this second half but reacts only to the words in 14:27. The words in Mark 16:7 clearly refer back to the former verse, but this construction disregards the fact that, according to Mark, only the Twelve were at the last supper, and the women would not have heard the words about Jesus going before them to Galilee (Rodd 2005:185).
- 4) The “angel” gives the command to the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. This absolves the disciples of the accusation that their return to Galilee was because of a lack of faith. There is tension between this and the implication that the disciples returned to Galilee because they did not know that Jesus had risen.
- 5) The terror of the women lets them not speak. This resolves the question of why the account of the women witnesses was initially not included in the Petrine account. This is argued also by some scholars who assume the secondary nature of the “empty tomb” story (Nineham 1963:447). The implication given here is that the empty tomb story was only later integrated into the narrative the Christians carried into the world because the women were so terrified, they only told the story much later. This absolves the authors of the traditional version of the accusation that they did not tell the truth. This detail is probably rooted in the truth that overwhelming spiritual experiences do provoke awe and fear. It might indeed have taken Mary Magdalene, if she was the first,

sometime of reflection on whether she had experienced something real or was just going crazy with grief.

- 6) Fear in Mark's gospel is the equivalent of a lack of faith. The ending of Mark indirectly accuses the women of a lack of faith (Ferda 2019:38). This "levels the playing fields" a bit between the male disciples and the female disciples, who otherwise were portrayed as the ones to show courage and loyalty, whereas the male disciples ran away. This of course was aimed at diminishing the women's claim to leadership and authority based on their superior loyalty. Kinukawa argues that this primarily is Mark's purpose, and it shows his "androcentric bias" (Kinukawa 1994:121). Still, ultimately it paved the way to an openness to acknowledging the disciple's lack of faith, which is an element of many of the other resurrection narratives. This fearful portrayal of the women is excised in all the alternative endings, including Luke and Matthew.

Undoubtedly, Mark in his portrayal of the resurrection story was being "liberal" with the traditions at his disposal. But all of his details are to some extent rooted in tradition and experience. It is very probable that this was the very first step in the direction of acknowledging the important place of women in the resurrection story. While this is speculation, it is probable that the early version of the passion story also had no mention of women at the cross and that this too was a new addition by Mark. He describes them with two typical words of Mark for true disciples (14:41): they "followed", and they "served" (Maisch 1998:8).

### **Longer Ending as independent Easter account**

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail the longer ending of Mark, which at some stage was written, possibly as a "unifying" account and ultimately emerged as a new "authorized" Easter account. It seems to have been an attempt to summarise a new consensus on the Easter tradition. Some people must have felt it should gain canonical status, but the debate around whether it should be added on to Mark continued well into the fourth century. It was ultimately resolved in the affirmative.

At first glance, it seems to be simply a "gospel harmony" (Schniewind 1968:214), but there are some differences which show that it is an independent tradition:

- 1) Verses 9–11 seems to be a summary of John's version, but there is no mention of Peter nor of the beloved disciple, who supposedly did believe. In the long ending none of the disciples believe. Mary does not receive a direct command from Christ. This might be a way to reduce her authority, but Lyons-Pardue (2020:52) sees it as a sign of the faith of Mary, as she goes and tells "without narrated prompting".
- 2) Verses 12 and 13 seem to be a summary of the Emmaus story, but there is no mention of recognition at the breaking of the bread. Here again, the others do not believe, unlike in the Lukan version.
- 3) Verse 14 mentions a table, as in the Emmaus story, and it mentions eleven disciples, not ten as in John, where Thomas was absent, or twelve as Paul relates it, perhaps not knowing about Judas' fate. Luke mentions food in the context of an appearance of Jesus to a group, but there the implication is that



there was more than just the inner circle of disciples, as the two from Emmaus were there as well.

- 4) Jesus scolds the eleven for their lack of faith. This is not found in the other gospels, but a lack of faith is mentioned in Luke 24:11 and Matthew has the short phrase, “but some doubted” (28:17). In Luke, the Emmaus disciples are scolded, (24:25–26), and in John there is the story of the scolding of one doubting disciple, Thomas (John 20:27–29).
- 5) There is no mention of Galilee or a mountain. While the proclamation of Jesus has similarities with Matthew and some stories in Acts, there are enough differences to affirm it as an independent tradition.

The longer ending of Mark should be taken seriously as an independent witness to the Easter traditions. It is likely that it does in some places convey authentic tradition which is not acknowledged in the canonical gospels and can bring us a step closer to understanding the roots of the Easter tradition and the process of the formation of a new “authorised” Easter tradition from the five variant narratives in the canonical documents. The reason for resistance to attaching it to the end of Mark was possibly rooted less in its content than in the desire of scribes, particularly some well-educated scribes, to let Mark speak for himself and not attach something that was a major break in style. If the traditions quoted in Eusebius that Mark founded the church in Alexandria are true (Stein 2008b:4) it would be understandable that Alexandrian scribes in particular would be hesitant to change Mark’s work.

Nevertheless, ultimately there does seem to have been justifiable pressure to make the new unified account part of the canonical documents. This means that churches can, with a clean conscience, use it as part of the canonical Christian tradition, as most would with John 8.

## **Conclusion**

While the debate about the ending of Mark will probably still rage for a long time, the arguments above could explain something about the way Mark recounted his version of the resurrection and why the accounts in the different gospels vary so widely. It seems that the development went in the direction that the women were increasingly acknowledged while less importance was attached to the sequence of appearance for authority in the church. This is probably also why the account of an appearance to Peter in particular became irrelevant. Authority became rooted in the direct words of Jesus. In the gospel accounts, the women are told to tell the disciples, the disciples are instructed to tell the world. In the longer ending of Mark, there is no longer any direct command of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, only to the disciples. She is given her place as first witness, but this no longer implies a position of leadership in the early church. Matthew 16:17–19 and John 21:15–19 both bring a direct commission to Peter.

It is without a doubt true that there were always prominent women in the Jesus movement and the early church. However, the pressures of upbringing and cultural norms conspired to keep pushing women to the margins. The initial marginalisation of the women’s witness to the resurrection in the early church is a symptom of this. In the gentile congregations, there were communities where women’s leadership was embraced, and the witness of Mary Magdalene treasured. This is likely to have been



the case in the Johannine community. But in the drive to unify the early church, these voices were increasingly marginalised and were ultimately pushed out, being declared “heretical”. These were the groupings that preserved alternative traditions. But some narratives survived in the four recognised gospels, particularly in that of John, which later also became part of the canon.

While ultimately the movement to include women as fully accepted leaders in the mainstream of the Christian church failed, there were in the end enough Christian documents which captured another narrative, and which would continue to inspire women in later generations to continue the struggle for full inclusion in the church. Both the abrupt ending of Mark and the later longer ending can be rediscovered to contain some of this liberating potential.

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