

# *Philomathes*

## **The Ending of Mark's Gospel: Intentional Cliffhanger or Literary Oversight?**

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### **Introduction**

**O**f the estimated 400,000 textual variations among the extant Greek manuscripts of the Bible,<sup>1</sup> only very small fraction have legitimate semantic significance. Of the meaningful variations, perhaps none is more debated than the ending of Mark's Gospel. From the surprising variations, to the peculiar wording, to the challenges of interpretation, it seems no matter how we view the data, we are faced with some degree of dissatisfaction with how the Gospel is concluded.

There are a number of ways the Gospel is concluded in the manuscripts, however, we will only concern ourselves with the three endings that compete for the most compelling witnesses: the short ending (16:8: *"καὶ ἐξεληθοῦσαι ἔφυγον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου εἶχεν γὰρ αὐτὰς τρόμος καὶ ἔκστασις καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπαν ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ"*)<sup>2</sup>, the intermediate ending (*"πάντα δὲ τὰ παρηγγελμένα τοῖς περὶ τὸν Πέτρον συντόμως ἐξηγγειλαν. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἀπὸ ἀνατολῆς καὶ ἄχρι δύσεως ἐξαπέστειλεν δι' αὐτῶν τὸ ἱερὸν καὶ ἄφθαρτον κήρυγμα τῆς αἰωνίου σωτηρίας. ἀμήν."*)<sup>3</sup>, and the familiar long ending

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. *Misquoting Jesus*. HarperCollins E-Books, 2014. 87-9.

<sup>2</sup> Short ending, Mark 16:8: "And they fled to depart from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Intermediate ending: "Now, they briefly reported to those with Peter everything which had been said. After these things, Jesus himself sent

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(present in almost all modern English translations, consisting of 16:1-20). Each ending has compelling manuscript evidence, and the intermediate ending and the long ending present two ways of rectifying the apparent oddities in language and narrative found with the short ending. In this paper, I present the manuscript evidence for each ending, discuss possible interpretations given the literary context of Mark's Gospel, and analyze the language of the various endings to show that the short ending is likely the authentic and intended ending of Mark's Gospel.

## **1. Manuscript Evidence**

Each ending has a wealth of compelling manuscripts, but also equally concerning issues with their witnesses. The most significant witnesses to the short ending are  $\kappa$  and B, both dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and of Alexandrian text-type.<sup>4</sup> There are also a number of Syriac, Sahidic, and Armenian manuscripts that witness the short ending.<sup>5</sup> Eusebius says in a letter to Marinus, "τὰ γοῦν ἀκριβῆ τῶν ἀντιγράφων τὸ τέλος περιγράφει τῆς κατὰ τὸν Μάρκον ἱστορίας ἐν τοῖς λόγοις τοῦ ὀφθέντος νεανίσκου ταῖς γυναιξὶ καὶ εἰρηκότος αὐταῖς, μὴ φοβεῖσθε, Ἰησοῦν ζητεῖτε τὸν ναζαρηνόν, καὶ τοῖς ἐξῆς, οἷς ἐπιλέγει· καὶ ἀκούσασαι ἔφυγον, καὶ οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν εἶπον, ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ. Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ σχεδὸν ἐν ἅπασι τοῖς ἀντιγράφοις τοῦ κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγελίου

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through them, from the east up to the west, the holy and eternal proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen."

<sup>4</sup> Metzger, Bruce M., and Bart D. Ehrman. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*. 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2005, 62-9.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 322 and Nestle-Aland, 174.

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περιέγραπται τὸ τέλος.”<sup>6</sup> Jerome, in answering a question about the discrepancies of the resurrection accounts, writes to Hebidia: “...*non recipimus Marci testimonium, quod in raris fertur Evangeliiis, omnibus Graeciae libris pene hoc capitulum in fine non habentibus...*”<sup>7</sup> The 28<sup>th</sup> Critical Edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (NA28) includes miniscule 304 as a witness to the short ending as well as Wallace.<sup>8</sup> However, this opinion is not shared by all, most notably Metzger and Ehrman<sup>9</sup>. Wallace also includes the 3<sup>rd</sup> century papyrus P<sup>75</sup> as witness for the short ending, despite only containing parts of the Gospels of Luke and John. Due to the striking similarities between what’s left of P<sup>75</sup> and B, we can conclude that the short ending is likely at least a 3<sup>rd</sup> century reading, although Wallace goes so far as to confidently date the short ending to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

The two most significant Greek witnesses to the intermediate ending are L and Ψ, both from the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Both NA28 and Metzger and Ehrman also cite various later

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<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *Ad Marinium*: “The accurate ones of the copies conclude the ending of the account according to Mark by the words of the young man who was seen by the women and who said to them, ‘do not be afraid, you seek Jesus the Nazarene,’ and so on, to which is added, ‘and after hearing this, they fled, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. The ending has been concluded in this way in nearly all copies of the Gospel according to Mark.”

<sup>7</sup> Jerome, *Epistles* 120: “... we do not accept the testimony of Mark because it is said in a few copies of the Gospel, with nearly all Greek codices not having this chapter in the end ....”

<sup>8</sup> Robinson, Maurice, et al. *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: Four Views*. B&H Academic, 2008. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 322; cf. Lunn, Nicholas P. *The Original Ending of Mark: A New Case for the Authenticity of Mark 16:9-20*. James Clarke & Co, 2015, who argues 304 cannot be cited as a witness as it is a commentary whose main purpose is not to copy the entire text of Mark and that the ending of the manuscript is likely lost.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Perspectives*, 16.

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minuscules and other ancient translations.<sup>11</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> century Old Latin Codex Bobiensis also witnesses the intermediate ending, which would be the oldest known witness to the intermediate ending.<sup>12</sup> The witnesses to the intermediate ending are lacking compared to the quality of witnesses to the short ending and the wealth of witnesses to the long ending.

Essentially all other manuscripts witness the long ending. All text-types, as well as many church fathers, dating as early as the late 4<sup>th</sup> century witness the long ending. Additionally, there is what Voelz calls “the silent witness,”<sup>13</sup> which is a peculiar change in format in B at the end of Mark’s Gospel. At the end of every book except four, the scribes of B left the rest of the column they were writing on blank and begin the next book at the start of the next column leaving no blank pages or whole blank columns. The four exceptions are as follows: 1) The last two lines of *Esdra*s occupy a page by themselves, with *Psalms* beginning on the next page. It should be noted that up until *Psalms* the codex is formatted with three columns per page, but from *Psalms* to *Esther* it has only two columns per page, switching back to three columns for the rest of the codex. Perhaps the page was left blank to accommodate the change in format; however, the scribe simply uses two differently sized columns on the same page when returning to three columns. 2) Roughly one and a half columns are left blank between *Tobit* and *Hosea*. 3) Roughly two and a half columns are left blank in

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<sup>11</sup> Nestle-Aland, 174; Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 323.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Stein, Robert H. “The Ending of Mark.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 18, no. 1, Jan. 2008, 79–98: 81.

<sup>13</sup> Voelz, James. “The Long Ending of the Gospel of Mark: Still Not to be Embraced?” *Concordia Journal*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2024, 25–42: 33.

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the transition from the *Old Testament* to the *New Testament*. 4) One column is left blank between Mark and Luke. Lunn argues that the reason for exceptions 1 and 2 is a change in genre (history to poetry and wisdom to minor prophets respectively, something similar is seen in the corresponding places in  $\kappa$ ),<sup>14</sup> and the reason for exception 3 is obvious.

It is tempting, then, to point to the blank space in exception 4 and argue for a lost ending. This argument is weak at best. To say that the blank space indicates uncertainty in the ending of Mark, one must explain why that blank space indicates uncertainty as opposed to something else: perhaps the scribe stopped for the day and forgot where he stopped the next day and began on the wrong page. There does not seem to be anything that justifies the claim that the space must be an uncertainty. If we were to hold that the blank space indicates a textual variation, it would be the only instance of a blank space indicating a textual variation in the whole codex. There are other ways of telling if something was an early textual variation: in many places throughout the codex, later scribes would indicate where they believed the original scribe had copied something incorrectly. No later scribe commented on the ending of Mark. There does not seem to be any evidence that the blank space at the ending of Mark indicates something other than a break in the text, let alone a major textual variation. Nonetheless, it is quite strange that there is a blank space, but it is too speculative to consider it a witness of any sort to the long ending.

Despite what he wrote to Hebidia, Jerome evidently includes the long ending in the *Vulgate* anyway. This is likely

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<sup>14</sup> Lunn, *Original Ending*, 28.

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due to the widespread acceptance and enjoyment of the long ending rather than the actual authenticity. A similar phenomenon can be seen throughout history. Erasmus eventually included the Johannine comma in the Textus Receptus because of broad criticism for its original omission, despite not finding any early Greek witnesses.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, we see something similar today with the *pericope de adultera* in John 7:53-8:11: despite overwhelming text critical evidence of its inauthenticity, it is still included in modern Bibles due to its widespread acceptance and enjoyment. Wallace cheerfully puts it, "If in doubt, don't throw it out."<sup>16</sup>

The witnesses to the long ending are certainly impressive, but they are weighed equally against the quality of  $\kappa$  and B and the testimonies of Eusebius and Jerome. Even if we hold that the blank column in B is evidence of the existence of the long ending, the scribe still deemed it inauthentic. Though the evidence for the intermediate ending is lacking, its mere existences raises questions about the authenticity of the long ending. On the face of it, the short ending appears to be authentic; the final element of the short ending is *prima facie* quite suspenseful and begs for a cleaner conclusion, so a scribe is more likely to add either the intermediate ending or the long ending to end the Gospel in a cleaner way than a scribe omitting what is a satisfying conclusion in favor for the short ending.

## **2. Literary Analysis**

A textual analysis of the manuscript data suggests that the short ending is likely the authentic ending of Mark, but understanding

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<sup>15</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 146.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, *Perspectives*, 27.

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the purpose and meaning of the short ending is not a trivial task. If Mark intended the short ending to be the conclusion, why end it on an ominous cliff-hanger? Since the intermediate ending and the long ending are not authentic, perhaps Mark intended to end with something else, a 'lost ending' of sorts. To argue that there is a long-lost ending would be to say that the short ending is inadequate and inappropriate at concluding the message Mark intended. Many interpretations take too much liberty and make use of modern interpretative methods with much zeal. Bilezikian, in his monograph *The Liberated Gospel*, proudly declares "The story of the rejected Messiah marching unflinchingly to a redemptive death at the hands of those He has come to save is often considered the quintessential tragic situation... the flawless development of the plot from complication to denouement conforms to Aristotle's requirements for Greek tragedy."<sup>17</sup> However, Mark was not a great tragedian writing for Dionysia, he was a humble disciple of Christ writing for early Christians. Analyses like Bilezikian's are exposed to attacks such as Stein's: "[interpretations like Bilezikian's] appear to be more like highly-educated 20th- and 21st-century existentialists than like 1st-century Christians."<sup>18</sup> A different interpretation of the short ending is desperately needed, one that doesn't suffer from over-analysis nor the dissatisfaction of merely claiming an abrupt ending. I will first list some of the issues with both theories of the ending of Mark which provides an extensive list

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<sup>17</sup> Bilezikian, Gilbert. *The Liberated Gospel: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark and Greek Tragedy*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010, 23; 99."

<sup>18</sup> Stein, "The Ending of Mark," 98.

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of arguments for both theories (Stein himself is against the theory that the short ending is the intended ending).

## **2.1 Issues with the Lost Ending Theory**

There is simply no direct evidence that there is a lost ending. Conversely there are clear patristic testimonials to the short ending as the authentic and intended ending. It is very difficult to compose an argument that makes a lost ending the only possible ending to Mark, or really any argument that comes remotely close to that conclusion. Any arguments for a lost ending merely have a lost ending as a possibility, and, due to the lack of direct evidence of a lost ending, there is no reason to claim that Mark is more likely to have lost its ending than any of the other Gospels. Given that there is direct evidence for the opposing theory, the lost ending must produce some evidence or reason of its own to reject that evidence or interpret it differently. However, there is no particular reason or evidence other than dissatisfaction that suggests either rejection or reinterpretation of the physical evidence. No matter how compelling the indirect evidence, all it may do is suggest that a lost ending exists.

## **2.2 Issues with Short Ending as Intended Ending Theory**

Perhaps the foremost argument against the short ending as the intended ending is that it would leave only one of Jesus' predictions unfulfilled in Mark other than those pertaining to the Parousia. Jesus predicts that He will be handed over to the Jews who will mock, flog, spit on, and kill Him, and then He will be resurrected after three days in 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33 (fulfilled in 14:46, 14:65, 15:19f, 15:33ff, 15:42-16:6), Judas' betrayal



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in 14:18 (fulfilled in 14:43ff), the disciples' desertion in 14:27 (fulfilled in 14:50), Peter's denial in 14:29ff (fulfilled in 14:66ff), the finding of a colt in 11:2 (fulfilled in 11:4), and the finding of a room to have the Passover meal in 14:13-5 (fulfilled in 14:16). The unfulfilled Parousia predictions are 8:38, 13:26, 14:62. The predictions of Jesus' resurrection are not neatly fulfilled, particularly 14:28. Stein argues that neither are the resurrection predictions in 8:31, 9:31, and 10:34 fulfilled, though all of them may be considered unfulfilled only if we distrust the angelic testimony in 16:6-7. Stein further claims that it is decidedly non-Markan that even one prediction be left unfulfilled and therefore there must be a different intended ending,<sup>19</sup> though, as I demonstrate below, this seems unlikely.

Mark proudly proclaims the nature of his work as "the gospel of Jesus Christ" (1:1), but the short ending concludes contrarily with a focus not on Jesus but rather Jesus' disciples. It is odd to end a work that so proudly proclaims Jesus pondering the disciples' fearfulness that it suggests a different ending.

Of course, there is the general issue of a 'suspended ending'.<sup>20</sup> Is it possible for an ancient work of literature to end in suspense? Lewis argues that though it is uncommon, Mark is "not unique" in having a suspended ending if we were to take the short ending as the intended ending.<sup>21</sup> Though he makes

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<sup>19</sup> Stein, "The Ending of Mark," 90; cf. Bamba, Justin R. "A Scribal Fabrication? A Text-Critical Defense of Mark 16:9-20 as Divinely Inspired and Canonically Authoritative." *Eleutheria*, vol. 7, no. 2, Dec. 2023, 4-22: 12.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, David. "Suspended Endings in Ancient Literature: A Comparison of the Gospel of Mark with Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*." *Concordia Journal*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2024, 43-59: 45.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, "Suspended Endings," 49.

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compelling and interesting comparisons to the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, claiming they both employ suspended endings, this line of reasoning again suffers from overanalysis. Positions like Bilezekian all attempt to view the ending of Mark's Gospel from an analytical lens which the Christians receiving the text certainly did not employ. It may be a bit misguided to argue for an interpretation that requires the impressive wealth of knowledge modern scholars such as Lewis and Bilezekian possess that 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians more than likely did not have.

The final issue with the short ending as the intended ending is not literary but rather syntactic, and it warrants a lengthier discussion of its own.

### **3. Syntactic data and analysis**

Proponents of "the short ending as the intended ending" theory must somehow explain the peculiar syntax of 16:8 in the context of being the final sentence. 16:8 ends with the notorious "ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ." There is no doubt that ending a phrase, let alone an entire book, with γάρ, is unusual and syntactically curious. The obvious first question is if it is possible to end a sentence with γάρ. If it is possible, then it is possible to end a book with γάρ. John 13:13 is a sentence that ends with γάρ and Genesis 18:15 in *LXX* ends a phrase with γάρ. Iverson finds 272 other instances of final γάρ in all of our extant Greek texts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.<sup>22</sup> Iverson also finds that a number of different authors and genres were utilizing final γάρ. So, sentences ending with γάρ are rare but certainly possible, yet it is not possible to effectively use the data Iverson

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<sup>22</sup> Iverson, Kelly R. "A Further Word on Final Γάρ (Mark 16:8)." *The Catholic Bible Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 11, Jan. 2006, 79–94: 82.

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gathered to argue for one position or another. He says, "the construction is so infrequent that the evidence can be used to argue both for and against the theory of a mutilated text [a lost ending] or the abrupt ending."<sup>23</sup> Stein, in his arguments for the lost ending theory, uses this data against the intended ending theory,<sup>24</sup> however, in lieu of more instances of final γάρ, Iverson's findings simply cannot be used to say anything other than that the short ending is not unique in ending with γάρ.

Though they lacked access to Iverson's specific study, Metzger and Ehrman make a similar argument against the short ending as the intended ending from the infrequency of final γάρ.<sup>25</sup> While they acknowledge the possibility of sentences ending with γάρ, they claim that no book has been found to end with γάρ, which casts so much doubt on the short ending as the intended ending that they reject it as the intended ending entirely: "from a stylistic point of view, to terminate a Greek sentence with the word γάρ is most unusual and exceedingly rare ... no instance has been found where γάρ stands at the end of a book ... it appears, therefore, that ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ of Mark 16:8 does not represent what Mark intended to stand at the end of his Gospel."<sup>26</sup> Yet van der Horst points out that Plotinus ends his 32<sup>nd</sup> treatise with a final γάρ.<sup>27</sup> van der Horst further says "it is obvious that, if a sentence can end with γάρ, a book can end with such a sentence." If some phrase can end a sentence, then that phrase can end a book. If the place which γάρ holds in that

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<sup>23</sup> Iverson, "A Further Word," 94.

<sup>24</sup> Stein, "The Ending of Mark," 91.

<sup>25</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 325-6.

<sup>26</sup> Metzger and Ehrman, *The Text*, 326.

<sup>27</sup> van der Horst, 123. van der Horst includes a more detailed discussion of the data that is beyond what is discussed here.

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sentence is, as usual, the second, and the sentence has only two words, then the book must end with γὰρ.<sup>28</sup> The data certainly demonstrate that final γὰρ, though rare, is certainly possible for sentences, and simple logic is enough to reason that a book can also end with γὰρ. So, from a syntactic perspective, the wording of the short ending is incapable of supporting either side of the debate.

## **Conclusion**

Barring the discovery of an earlier and higher quality witness to a different authentic ending, the short ending must be both the authentic and intended ending to Mark's Gospel. Despite the impressive wealth of manuscripts that contain the long ending, the quality of κ and B are immense, and the testimonies of Eusebius and Jerome to the inauthenticity of the long ending and lack of an ending other than the short ending are convincing and compelling. Though the short ending *prima facie* suffers from some literary issues, I believe there is a simple and compelling interpretation that rids the short ending of those problems. There is no doubt that the short ending is rather abrupt; however, it still does bring the Gospel to an apt conclusion. Contrary to what Stein and other scholars have claimed, the short ending does fulfill the prediction at 14:28 so long as we trust the testimony of the angel who had knowledge of Jesus' prediction. In fact, 14:28 is one of the most explicitly fulfilled predictions in Mark alongside 14:13ff ("... just as He told

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<sup>28</sup> van der Horst, P. W. "CAN A BOOK END WITH ΓΑΡ? A NOTE ON MARK XVI. 8." *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, Apr. 1972, 121-4: 122.

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you"). The only way it may be asserted that the 14:28 prediction is unfulfilled is for the angelic testimony to be doubted. Angels play vital roles in other Gospels, where it is imperative certain characters trust what they say (Matthew 1:20, 2:13; Luke 1:13ff, 1:26ff, 2:8ff), as well as the role angels play of ministering to Jesus earlier in Mark 1:13. Angels are trusted messengers and helpers in many other places in the Gospels, and there does not seem to be any reason for them to be distrusted in Mark 16. So, the angelic testimony of Jesus' resurrection in Mark 16:6ff should not be distrusted.

The focus of the short ending is most certainly still on Jesus. Yet, He is unable to be the central focus in the same way He was in the rest of the Gospel on account of His death. Finally, ἔφοβοῦντο γάρ' is the women's apt reaction to a miraculous sight. It is not uncommon for Mark to record other's reactions to Jesus' miracles immediately following what happened (1:27, 4:41, 5:15, 6:51, 7:37, 9:6). Viewed as its own story, as part of a larger work (like a miracle account as opposed to the ending of a book) which may be done given the "change of scenery" in 16:1 ("When the Sabbath was past ..."), the short ending works well as a part of the larger Gospel narrative and is decidedly Marcan in character. Coming from an author who likely has limited Greek capabilities<sup>29</sup> and writing as a humble disciple of Christ for other lay Christians, the abrupt no-frills finale of the short ending is quite reasonable. Given the manuscript evidence for each ending, the discussion of the literary oddities of the short ending, the analysis of the language of the various endings,

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<sup>29</sup> Witherington, Ben. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2001: 19.

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and finally my own simple and logical interpretation of the short ending as the authentic and intended ending of Mark's Gospel, I have argued that the short ending is likely the authentic and intended reasonable and apt conclusion to the Gospel of Mark.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> A digitized version of Codex Vaticanus was accessed at [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.gr.1209](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1209). A digitized version of Codex Sinaiticus was accessed at <https://codexsinaiticus.org/en/manuscript.aspx>. Digitized versions of all other manuscripts were accessed at [csntm.org](http://csntm.org).

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