

GLEANINGS — February 22, A.D. 2015
Textual Criticism, Part Five

This topic was taken up in conjunction with a series of sermons in the Gospel of Mark. As many English Bibles indicate via footnoting, some ancient MSS (manuscripts; hand written copies of Scripture) omit the concluding verses of the Gospel, namely Mark 16:9-20.

To defend the canonicity – that is the legitimacy of the passage as part of God's infallible and fully authoritative word – we have considered several issues:

1. The Bible's many human authors were overshadowed and inspired by its one divine Author, Who has promised to preserve His word. We self-consciously START all our consideration trusting God about that. We believe 2 Timothy 3:16!

2. We do not deny that there are variants – i.e. MSS that omit the passage. In other words, our defense is not ignoring them like the proverbial ostrich. Yet based on our trust in divine preservation, we insist that this and all passages with variant readings present us with an "either/or" circumstance, not a "we-have-no-idea-how-the-original-read" circumstance.

3. In and of itself, the fact that some of the MSS which omit Mark 16:9-20 are very old does not prove their greater faithfulness to the God-breathed, inerrant AUTOGRAPHS (original documents of Scripture).

4. A passage cannot be rejected merely because it contains statements that are lacking in parallel passages. For example Acts 20:35 gives us a precious saying of Christ found nowhere in the four canonical Gospels: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." John 1:1-18 is unparalleled in any of the other three Gospels.

Honoring Scripture above any uninspired human writing, we appeal finally to some vital witnesses of the canonicity of the last verses of Mark 16. They are known as the Church Fathers. They do not have the authority of the apostles, but they were disciples possessed of great wisdom and knowledge. Let us not be infected with the proud spirit that exalts modern men above the men of old!

We know that the Bible writers themselves cite passages of Scripture that came before them. Our Lord perhaps more than any other repeatedly refers to what is written in the Law of Moses...invokes the words of the prophets...questions His opponents based on what David wrote in Psalm 110.

Likewise, patristic writers (church fathers) refer to Mark 16:9-20 AS SCRIPTURE! And many of those fathers predate the MSS which supposedly cast aspersions on the passage. In other words, they quote Mark 16:9-20 BEFORE the MSS which omit the passage were produced! Therein lies powerful evidence that the passage was recognized as such by the ancient church. Remember, the church does not DETERMINE what is Scripture and what is not, it only RECOGNIZES Scripture...

A book recommendation will conclude this series of "Gleanings" on textual criticism. It is titled The Last Twelve Verses of the Gospel According to Saint Mark, by John William Burgon (originally published A.D. 1871 and now in the public domain; a FREE Kindle version is available from Amazon)

Familiarly known according to his academic post, Dean Burgon was a contemporary of the scholars Westcott and Hort, who argued against the canonicity of the closing verses of Mark's Gospel. In this masterful work, Burgon examines the legacies of many patristic writers and argues very powerfully and cogently as a believing scholar that Mark 16:9-20 is surely a portion of the whole counsel of God. Amen.