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This an eTalk on *Gospel Women and the Long Ending of Mark*, by Kara J. Lyons-Pardue, Professor of New Testament, Point Loma Nazarene University.

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The genesis of the idea which grew into the book *Gospel Women and the Long Ending of Mark* published in 2020 in the Library of New Testament Studies by T&T Clark was the result of a collection of factors and intertwining interest areas, which were cultivated during my doctoral studies at Princeton Theological Seminary.

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/gospel-women-and-the-long-ending-of-mark-9780567692405/>

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I, like many modern Christian readers of scripture, had not spent much time pondering the maze of endings that are found at the end of modern English translations of Mark’s Gospel. In fact, early in my studies I became entranced by the provocative ways in which Mark’s apparently earliest ending at 16:8 can be read. (I remain interested in readings that make sense of the ending with women’s fear and silence.) Yet, when I returned to the subject of Mark’s endings after increased exposure to the convictions and broader literary culture of the early Christian movement, I was confounded anew by the various later endings in the manuscript tradition.

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Mark 16:9-20—Mark’s “Long Ending”—begins by bringing a female disciple who had just failed completely in the previous verse (16:8) back onto the scene. She is granted a successful encore performance, while the wayward Eleven disciples are permitted to flounder further in disbelief in the textual expansion that is 16:9-20. In such a sparse text, as the composite appendix to Mark represents, a great deal of literary attention and description are invested in this earliest witness to the resurrected Christ, the faithful Mary Magdalene. This primary female witness is the first to receive and successfully utilize an opportunity—a second chance—to receive the news of Jesus’s resurrection and respond accordingly.

It has become axiomatic in biblical scholarship that early Christianity grows increasingly restrictive to women’s leadership as time passes. There is good evidence for such a trajectory. And, yet, the textual history of the Markan endings bear witness to a demonstrable interest in vindicating one woman, Mary Magdalene, by retrieving testimony to her post-resurrection encounter with the Lord, and her subsequent faithfulness as a resurrection witness.

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1. **Scholarly patterns**

The book’s *Forschungsbericht* proceeds by building upon the careful review of the scholarly landscape concerning studies of the Markan Endings found in James Kelhoffer’s 2000 book, *Miracle and Mission*. As such, my survey of scholarly forebears is not exhaustive, but seeks to identify patterns in the ways interpreters have approached Mark’s endings. The basic premise is that most scholars who engage Mark’s Long Ending have, to a great extent, only asked questions of originality or authenticity.

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For the most part, the major “facts” of such a debate have been established since the 19th century. (manuscript evidence, patristic attestation, and internal literary features). In modern Biblical Studies, questions about Mark’s Long Ending largely begin and end with the question of *should it* or *should it not* be read?

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The fact is that for the majority of Christian history, nearly all of those who read Mark encountered a text that proceeded from “the beginning of the gospel” at 1:1 through 16:20 and the “signs that followed.” But rather than dealing with the narrative content or theological implications of the twelve-verse appendix to the Gospel, most scholarly questions fixate on preliminaries: *which ending is original?* (The answer to the originality question is presumed to necessitate the answer about its authority, although how originality and authority are to be equated is less frequently argued.)

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Instead of extending the debate about whether or not the Long Ending *should* be read, this study begins with the recognition that when Mark *was* read by many generations of Christian audiences, it was read through 16:20. The vast majority of ancient copies ended at 16:20 (with the few, outstanding exceptions, including the great fourth-century uncial codices of Sinaiticus [א] and Vaticanus [B]). Even so, the overwhelming majority of manuscripts that carried through the Long Ending did not smooth over the abrupt transition between 16:8 and 9. Thus, we need to ask what impact the expanded ending had on a reading of Mark and its message as a whole.

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Although my survey of the relevant scholarly treatments aims to underscore the preliminary and repetitive nature of the questions asked of Mark’s Long Ending, I do note exceptions to the scholarly trends: treating, in particular, books by Kelhoffer, Bridget Gilfillan Upton and Antoinette Clark Wire. This excerpt from the book explains my approach: “My selective exegesis of 16:9-20 and comparison to other Gospel traditions is, in some ways, an attempt to highlight what should be obvious: Mary is the first witness to the resurrection and the Eleven disbelieve. Yet, as the survey of representative treatments of the Long Ending illustrates, the characterization of Mary Magdalene and the male disciples within the spectrum of faith has not been an object of attention in studies of Mark 16:9-20. Few interpreters have explored the way that the Long Ending functions as an early ‘reading’ of Mark, supplying narrative closure to trajectories that were of interest to ancient readers (which both align with and differ from modern readers’ concerns).”[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. **Mary Magdalene in the Long Ending and Mark**

In the mix of tradition and innovation that is the Long Ending, Mary Magdalene’s role is brief, but also significant (Mark 16:9-11). The Long Ending depicts Mary Magdalene as encountering Jesus alone (resonant of John 20:11-18). In Mark 16:9, the risen Christ appears *first* (πρῶτον) to Mary Magdalene. Unlike many women who have shown up in Mark’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene is named (rather than anonymous or identified only by familial ties). She is described as formerly demon-possessed (so Luke 8:2). The Long Ending portrays Mary Magdalene as a rejected proclaimer of the message about Jesus’s resurrected status as living (as in Luke 24:11). Her encounter with Jesus and her response of proclamation provide the pattern in which the two disciples in transit follow in the episode immediately subsequent (Mark 16:12-13). Just like with Mary, after Jesus appears to them and they report it to the rest of the disciples, the Eleven fail to believe again (16:11, 13).

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It is this brief but paradigmatic encore performance by Mary Magdalene in the Long Ending that provokes a reinvestigation of her role in the preceding text. As one of the few named women in the Second Gospel, Mary Magdalene did not enter the narration until after Jesus’s crucifixion was complete. At that point, however, the post-crucifixion narratives highlight her foremost position as witness to the final episodes in the Gospel (she is listed first in each repetitious and otherwise fluctuating recitation of women’s names in 15:40, 47; 16:1).

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Because my study endeavors to read the Long Ending as a conclusion that was written specifically to bring the Second Gospel to completion, the characterization of women in the uncontested portion of Mark (1:1–16:8) is relevant. In a Gospel in which Jesus’s approval of followers is scant at best, his response to several unnamed women stands out as extraordinary. By examining the accounts of the women to whom Jesus responds positively, we can note common factors of faithfulness, tenacity, and exemplary status: in accounts of the woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34), the generous widow (12:41-44), and the woman who anoints Jesus (14:3-9). It is noteworthy that the presentation of Mary’s encounter with the risen Christ shares these praised attributes. Mary’s depiction in the Long Ending sets a pattern outlining the response to Jesus, that of *going* and *telling*, that is to characterize believers subsequently (16:13, 15, 20).

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1. **Unfaithful Disciples in the Long Ending and Mark**

It is worth noting that Jesus’s male disciples also receive a second-chance within the narrative to redeem their own fearful flight (see 14:50-52), like the one afforded to Mary Magdalene beyond the threshold of Mark 16:8. They receive third and fourth chances, in fact. Mary’s encounter with the risen Jesus is, indeed, described as *first* (16:9). But the Eleven receive a report of Jesus’s resurrection not only from her (v. 10), but also from the two others whom he encountered while they were walking (v. 13). Finally, the Eleven are confronted by Jesus himself (v. 14). Unfortunately, the Long Ending reports that they disbelieve the message, rejecting the messengers’ reports (“they disbelieved” [ἠπίστησαν], v. 11; “neither did those men believe” [οὐδὲ ἐκείνοις ἐπίστευσαν], v. 13). Indeed, when their resurrected Lord appears in their midst, the reunion begins with reproach rather than rejoicing (v. 14).

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The abrupt transition between scolding (v. 14) and glorious commissioning (v. 15) must have struck at least one ancient reader as odd, as another manuscript variant bears witness. The Freer Logion (found only in Codex W and in Latin translation in Jerome, *Pelag.* II.15 1-9) contains their excuse, smoothing out the seams between condemnation and commission. It is striking, then, that a bridge between failure and success is not found in any other copies of Mark’s Long Ending. Although 16:9-14 reports that the male disciples persisted in and even intensified their faithlessness, it assumes (without narrating it) their hasty reformation into effective witnesses to the resurrection.

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Whereas the lack of credulity may have been seen as an ancient feature of manliness (in contrast to supposedly gullible women), believing Jesus is a positive attribute throughout the broader Gospel According to Mark. Another feature of ancient perceptions of manly virtue—stoic impassivity—deserves closer inspection. Jesus himself expresses extreme emotion when warranted (e.g., 11:15; 14:33-34). Thus, the male disciples’ mourning and weeping in 16:10 would not be portrayed critically in the proper context. It is possible, however, that it is the Eleven’s mourning for a Lord who is not *actually* dead that should be perceived as worthy of scorn. Mary Magdalene’s bold proclamation—without any reference to her emotional state (unlike in John 20:11, 13, 15)—to a collection of weeping male disciples can be read through the lens of gendered expectations as establishing her as *the* model disciple and them as a cautionary tale of weak faithlessness (see 16:10-11). Beyond viewing Mary’s witness in its own light, her faithfulness and obedience are highlighted as the Eleven’s initial responses to the witnesses’ testimonies stand in stark contrast.

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1. **Implications: Discipleship in light of Mary Magdalene in the Long Ending**

It is taken as a given, and with quite a bit of evidence in support, that early Christianity evidenced a rapid restriction of women’s leadership and involvement as the movement grew and developed. In light of such a shift, however, the quick and widespread acceptance of the Long Ending as the conclusion to the Second Gospel stands out as a prominent example of a contrary tendency. In the Long Ending, Mary Magdalene is highlighted as the first and pattern-defining witness to Jesus’s resurrection. Her pattern of going and telling becomes definitive of what faithfulness looks like in the post-resurrection context for Jesus’s followers.

Perhaps even more astonishing, the Long Ending evidences willingness to extend the narrated disbelief and disfavor of Jesus’s male disciples, men who unquestionably became heroes of the early Christian movement. Arguably, the author of the appendix to Mark’s Gospel that comprises what is now 16:9-20 picked up on trends already evident within Mark 1:1–16:8. Those trends included a willingness to critique even Jesus’s most acclaimed followers and to challenge deeply entrenched gender expectations. That is, even Jesus’s closest disciples are subject to harsh judgment. Further, people who were powerful and more socially privileged are commonly depicted as rejecting Jesus. In contrast, those more vulnerable, including women, stood out as those willing to have ears to hear and receive Jesus’s message. The author of the Long Ending carries forward this particularly Markan emphasis.

At the same time, the author of the Long Ending supplemented the conclusion of Mark in a way that was canonically referential—utilizing and simplifying episodes from Matthew, Luke, and John—even as the Gospel canon was in its earliest stages of formation. The author of the appendix expanded Mark’s resurrection narratives by drawing selectively from other accounts in ways that extend Markan themes. These include Mark’s willingness to call out unfaithfulness and to highlight faithfulness, no matter where each is found.

As such, the Long Ending stands as an early reception of Mark’s Gospel, enfolded into the process of the book’s developing place in the fourfold Gospel canon. In keeping with this ancient author’s perception of the earliest Gospel, the Long Ending takes pains to preserve Mary Magdalene’s place as a trustworthy and faithful witness to Jesus’s resurrection—affording no such favors to the Eleven—and to reinforce her active proclamation as the pattern of discipleship by which future generations of believers should define themselves.

1. *Gospel Women and the Long Ending*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)