

CODEX W: A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE FREER LOGION

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The alternate ending to Mark's gospel that appears within Codex W was written to patch up Mark's inconclusive gospel, to reestablish the faith of its audience in Jesus and Heaven, to solve its audience's false understanding of good and evil, and to pacify Satan's character. Written by a scribe we may speculate as Egyptian, the author's purpose is apparent through the addition of a new ending to Mark's gospel in this short passage. Though left aside by many scholars, an analysis of this passage widens our understanding of the scribe's theology. Through his use of words, characters, and ideas, his viewpoint is shaped and it conveys a message to his audience which is not present in any of the four canonical gospels.

Codex W, which contains the four canonical gospels, is also known as the 'Codex Washingtonianus' or the 'Freer Gospels', because it resides in the Freer Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The manuscript itself was purchased for sixteen hundred pounds by Charles L. Freer in the year 1907 in Gizeh near Cairo, from a dealer by the name of Ali Arabi.¹ A description of the physical aspects of the actual Codex is de-

scribed by Lawton and Merrill, who state that, "the Greek text was written in dark brown ink on thick parchment, and the leaves were brittle, especially at the edges; many of the pages were firmly stuck together and held desert sand in the wrinkles."² Prior to the Codex's discovery, scholars had already known about this unique ending to Mark's gospel through the writings of Jerome.³ Writing about an ending very similar to the ending of Codex W, Jerome stated that it was found in some copies of Greek manuscripts.⁴ Although Jerome does not tell the reader where he found these manuscripts, the only copy we have remains in Codex W.⁵ Unlike the modern New Testament, where Mark's gospel is ordered second after Matthew, the ordering of Codex W is different. Today, the canonical gospels are ordered as follows: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Codex W orders them in the so-called Western order which is: Matthew, John, Luke,

²Lawton & Merrill, 66.

³Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81.

⁴Montague Rhoads James, *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses: With Other Narratives and Fragments* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 34.

⁵Metzger, 202.

¹Thomas Lawton and Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art* (Washington: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 66-67.

and Mark.⁶ Metzger asserts that what is most noteworthy about Codex W is the variant ending attributed to Mark.⁷ This additional ending, named after its discoverer Charles Freer, is referred to as the Freer Logion.⁸ The agrapha of Codex W has been translated as follows:

“And they excused themselves, saying, ‘This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over unclean things of the spirits. Therefore reveal thy righteousness now’ – thus they spoke to Christ. And Christ replied to them, ‘The term of years for Satan’s power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who have sinned I was delivered over to death, that they may return truth and sin no more; that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven.’”⁹

The scribe chooses to incorporate this text within Mark’s gospel rather than within Matthew, Luke, or John. The most obvious reason for such a choice might have been directly related to Mark’s inconclusiveness and desire to leave his gospel unfinished and open-ended.¹⁰ Thus, through this insertion the scribe is able to complete Mark’s unfinished work and bring it all together. In addition, Mark’s gospel unsympathetically illustrates apostles who are weak and who deny Jesus.¹¹ Ultimately, Jesus does not turn them away,

but instructs them to be better.¹² This portrayal of Mark’s apostles (as ones who lacked an understanding of Jesus’ plan and purpose) was already in place, and because the author of W intends to portray the apostles in his ending the same way, the addition fits in well with the rest of Mark in terms of characters. The apostles in Mark are illustrated as coming to Jesus’ call, which suggests that Jesus is a monarch or a teacher.¹³ Thus, this representation of Mark’s apostles and Jesus fit in perfectly for the scribe of W, who also portrays the relationship between Jesus and his disciples as that of a teacher and his students. Morton Smith explains a recurring tradition of Mark’s gospel, where at the end of each narrative the disciples ask Jesus about the meaning of what he has said or did and Jesus’ explanations are either moralizing expositions or serve the apologetic interests of the early church.¹⁴ With this in mind, the scribe of W uses the same narrative scheme as Mark’s author to express the interest of the Church towards its audience. This narrative pattern, already found within Mark’s gospel, lends itself well to the ending the author wishes to assimilate. Thus, it would have been easy for this passage to have gone undetected if inserted within Mark’s gospel. Finally, in the Western ordering of the gospels, Mark’s gospel comes last and this may have been the reason or one of several for the additional ending to be attributed to Mark. Read at the very end of the four gospels, the Freer Logion

⁶Metzger, 80.

⁷Metzger, 81.

⁸James, 34.

⁹Metzger, 81.

¹⁰Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 373.

¹¹Harris, 373.

¹²Sherman E. Johnson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Mark* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), 75.

¹³Johnson, 82.

¹⁴Morton Smith, “Forms, Motives, and Omissions in Mark’s Account of the Teaching of Jesus,” in *Understanding the Sacred Text* (ed. John Reumann. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972), 157.

becomes the final words of Jesus Christ.

What remains difficult is contending whether W is the original author of this passage or if the scribe simply copied this text from another manuscript. Since it was present during Jerome's lifetime, "it can be logically argued that the logion once existed in a wider frame."¹⁵ In trying to uncover the truth, Howell asserts that in the end, the reading of this passage reflects the traditions of the scribe in either case.¹⁶ In other words, whether the scribe created it or simply copied it from another source, his intention, by preserving this particular ending to Mark and conveying it to his audience, remains the same.

Crucial elements of W's intentions are revealed when we understand the audience that the writer is addressing. Since the Codex was purchased in Egypt and dated fourth or fifth century,¹⁷ we may assume that the author of Codex W is addressing Egyptians living during the late fourth to early fifth century CE.¹⁸ Even if this text is not original to the Scribe of Codex W, the fact that the scribe copied this text still asserts his intentions and traditions as quoted earlier from Howell. Moore notices a connection between the characters and readers of the New Testament in which the reader

is able to relate to the characters.¹⁹ Similarly, Kelber notes that the characters symbolize realities, which link to the reader and serve as models for both understanding and conduct.²⁰ Given that the passage is inserted at the very end of the gospel after Jesus' death and resurrection, we may assume this was done purposely by the author to easily allow the readers to relate to the passage because, like the apostles, they are followers of Jesus living in a time after his death and resurrection. Since the readers or listeners see their own situations in those of the disciples, W uses this technique to send a message to the audience by having Jesus send a message to his disciples.

From the Freer Logion, it is clear that the apostles are not believers and that they are disgruntled with what has transpired thus far after Jesus' death. Taking into account this writing method, if the readers are meant to see themselves within the disciples, it would then make sense to inverse the process so that we better understand the audience during that time. Ergo, by looking at what the disciples are saying, we can attribute their rhetoric directly to what the audience may have been thinking and vocalizing. Within this ending, the apostles command Jesus to reveal himself as they ask about evil and its existence even after Jesus has come. Although speculative, it is not far-fetched to assume that the Egyptians nearing the turn of the fifth century are unclear about Jesus' message; like many other people throughout the history of time, they wonder about evil in the world and are ask-

¹⁵Steven L. Cox, "A History and Critique of Scholarship Concerning the Markan Endings" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991), 137.

¹⁶Justin R. Howell, "The Characteristics of Jesus in Codex W," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006): 48.

¹⁷Metzger, 80.

¹⁸Howell, 48.

¹⁹Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), 74-75.

²⁰Werner H. Kelber, *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 172-173.

ing why it is still present following the Messiah's resurrection. The scribe answers his people and gives them instructions through Jesus' character, who gives instructions to his apostles by warning them of greater dangers to come. Jesus states that he "was delivered over to death, that they may return truth and sin no more; that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven."²¹ Through Jesus' words, the scribe tells the audience that Jesus' suffering was for them and that they too will be in heaven. The speech explains to the audience the reason for Jesus' death, which the author of W would not have had to do if the audience he was writing to was already aware of such.

As the scribe addresses their inquiries regarding evil and its presence within the world they live in with a warning to defend themselves of worse evils to come, it may seem at first that the writer has completely sidetracked from capturing his audience's attention and from sending his message forth. But such is not the case and the writer's theology speaks volumes in this warning to the disciples about harsher trials awaiting them in the future. By warning his audience of worse things to come, the author recapitulates Jesus' glory in heaven and illustrates to everyone that although there are worse things to come, the ultimate end is in heaven and that these worldly things are of little concern. We see this concept realized more clearly when reading further down this passage as the author continues Jesus' speech with an explanation of his resurrection and the glory of heaven. Almost as a timeline, the author talks about evil and bad things to come, with Jesus explaining his death, the purpose of his

resurrection, and finally, the concluding word of the entire ending is "heaven". The passage becomes a visual image of the trials all Christians must face, in which the belief is that the hardships faced on earth will be washed away when entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, the warning of worse things to come doesn't sidestep their question at all. It draws the audience closer to this concept of heaven that Jesus is pushing forth. The writer is telling the audience to let go of this world, its sinners, and its evilness and to embrace, "the incorruptible glory of righteousness which is in heaven."²²

We may deduce that some Egyptians were not well instructed about Jesus' resurrection and the belief that Jesus' death was to wash away the sins of humanity. The audience, from the rhetoric of the apostles, seems to believe that Jesus' death should have improved this world and made it a better place - free of sin and evil. In offering his audience a different understanding of Jesus, W takes their focus away from the physical world and turns their attention to the spiritual world, the world after this one known as heaven. The apostles command Jesus to appear, in order to answer their questions, which illustrates that they seemingly lack faith. Jesus appears and quiets their disbelief by opening their eyes to the things they cannot see, but in which they should believe. This passage addresses the disbelief found in the audience and turns their attention towards heaven's glory. The theology of W is present as the scribe directs his audience into asserting their faith in Jesus and Heaven once more.

Aside from its theological purpose, perhaps one of the most intriguing elements of this

²¹Metzger, 81.

²²Metzger, 81.

Deuterocanonical text is that it mentions Satan and the fulfillment of Satan's purpose. Though overlooked by most of the scholars who touch upon the subject of this Codex, this is perhaps the earliest attempt at pacifying Satan's character. In this passage, the apostles attribute the lack of laws and the unbelief of others directly to Satan, holding him responsible for the terrible evil that is plaguing their world; however, Jesus reassures them that, "The term of years for Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near."²³

In understanding the author's theology to reassure the audience about the sacrifice of Christ to erase all sins and looking towards heaven in order to overcome the problems of this world, there is no direct need to include Satan. The message can be communicated without the use of Satan's character ever having to be mentioned. In understanding the concept of Satan for a Christian audience, Pagels explains Satan's character, "for Mark and for later Christianity – [as] God's antagonist, his enemy, even his rival."²⁴ Thus the dualism between good and evil comes alive in this passage, as we are presented with a cosmic battle between Satan and God. This dualism increases with the words the author uses when stating that all evil is "under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over unclean things of the spirits."²⁵ Here, Jesus not only mentions Satan in his response, but he completely absolves him of any wrong-

doing. W could have had Jesus avoid Satan's character altogether, but he specifically has Jesus refer to him and writes that there are worse things than Satan on the horizon. In mentioning that Satan's task has been fulfilled, we witness a greater purpose at work. The author of W sees Satan in a different light than the Christians of that time; Satan is not opposed to Jesus, he is merely helping Jesus follow his path. Scenes such as 'The Temptation of Jesus' may have been orchestrated to help Christ in his understanding of himself and in that light Satan's purpose in helping Jesus is mentioned by W as being fulfilled. Another explanation for pacifying Satan's character may be attributed to the portrait of Judas put forth by Luke and John. As Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal of him, "Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve."²⁶ In this portrayal of Judas, he becomes one with Satan and as a result, Satan is as close to Jesus as any of his apostles are. Therefore, the betrayal of Judas, which sets into motion the passion of Christ, may be directly attributed to Satan, who helps Jesus accomplish his Messianic purpose. This mentioning of Satan as having fulfilled his duty is an attempt to portray the character of Satan as good and as an aid for the fulfillment of Jesus' purposes on earth.

The Freer Logion had been of considerable interest; however, its dating to the fourth or fifth century CE has made it clear to most that this ending to Mark is not original. Consequently, it has been brushed aside and overlooked. Little is written on or studied about this ending and even less on Jesus' mentioning of Satan's role as fulfilled. Though one cannot claim this passage is authentic to Mark, it is

²³ Metzger, 81.

²⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995), 47.

²⁵ Metzger, 81.

²⁶ Luke 22:3, *New Revised Standard Version*.

still important in its theology and its purpose since it was written as a message to a specific audience. Clearly, it addresses disbelievers, who use the evil found on earth to disprove that Jesus was the Messiah. To this, the scribe has Jesus appear, quiet the non-believers, and reassert that there is evil in the world and that more evil will undoubtedly come; however, Jesus' purpose in dying on the cross and his resurrection was to wash away the sins of humanity and to allow the Kingdom of God to be opened for anyone who embraces the spiritual world. Through this passage, Satan is given a final cameo in which his character is properly concluded from the narrative of the gospel. W manages to pacify Satan and

asserts that Satan has fulfilled his purpose. W obviously had a much different understanding of Satan's character, in which he serves Jesus, rather than the selfish and evil Satan who battles God for cosmic control of the universe. Satan is recognized as a stepping stone for Jesus, who allows him to fulfill his purpose and who cannot be the father of evil if things worse than Satan are coming in the future. Ultimately, W uses Mark's gospel to portray these ideas and uses the apostles to represent the audience and listeners. Though it is clear the Freer Logion was not written by Mark, it does incorporate a theological message to its audience and simultaneously pacifies Satan's character as a helper rather than a hinderer.

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