

Down with forgery!

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Every now and again I am handed a question that starts out by irritating me, but after I calm down I perceive that God is nudging me to clarify a point that needs it. This happened recently with the 'jewel' attributed to Jerome that in his day 'most' or 'almost all' of the Greek manuscripts did not have the last twelve verses of Mark. Since of the 1700 or so Greek MSS known to us that contain the last chapter of Mark only three don't have them (one of them being a falsification at this point), how could a vast majority in the 5th century be reduced to a small fraction of one percent later on? In terms of the science of statistical probability, such an inversion is simply impossible. Only a world-wide campaign that was virtually 100% successful could bring about such a switch, and there is not a shred of evidence for such a campaign. Recall that Diocletian's campaign to destroy NT MSS (applied unevenly in different areas) was past history by a century (not to mention Constantine's 'conversion' and the consequences thereof). Kenneth Scott Latourette (*A History of Christianity* [New York: Harper, 1953], p. 231) describes Eusebius Hieronimus Sophronius (alias Jerome) as "a gifted and diligent scholar, enormously erudite, a master of languages, a lover of books, wielding a facile, vigorous, and often vitriolic pen" who "was an eloquent advocate of the monastic life". He doubtless had his defects [don't we all], but he was not ridiculously stupid, as he would have had to be to make the statement attributed to him. Our knowledge of the 'jewel' comes from the tenth century [the interval of five centuries does not inspire confidence]; it is almost certainly a forgery (someone 'borrowing' a famous name to give credence to some statement). Since 'sacred cows' don't like to die, a review of some relevant history is in order.

K. Aland on Egypt

Even that great champion of an Egyptian text, Kurt Aland, recognized that during the early centuries, including the 4th, Asia Minor (especially the Aegean area) was "the heartland of the Church". (It also became the heartland of the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Churches.) The demand for copies of the NT would have a direct bearing on the supply, and on the areas where copies would be concentrated. But on the subject of Egypt, Aland had this to say:

Our knowledge of the church in Egypt begins at the close of the 2nd century with bishop Demetrius who reorganized the dominantly Gnostic Egyptian church by founding new communities, consecrating bishops, and above all by establishing relationships with the other provinces of the church fellowship. Every church needed manuscripts of the New Testament—how was Demetrius to provide them? Even if there were a scriptorium in his own see, he would have to procure "orthodox" exemplars for the scribes. The copies existing in the Gnostic communities could not be used, because they were under suspicion of being corrupt. There is no way of knowing where the bishop turned for scribal exemplars, or for the large number of papyrus manuscripts he could give directly to his communities. ("The Text of the Church?" Kurt Aland, *Trinity Journal*, Vol. 8, N^o 2, Fall, 1987, p. 138 [actually sent out in the Spring, 1989].)

But just a minute, please. In the year of our Lord 200, who in Egypt was still speaking Greek? (For that matter, who among the ordinary people had ever spoken Greek there?) What Greek speaking communities could the worthy Demetrius have been serving? Would the scholars linked to the library in Alexandria be likely to bow to Demetrius? So far as we know, no apostle ever ministered in Egypt, and no Autograph of a New Testament book was held there. The Gnostic dominance probably should not surprise us. But the situation in Alexandria is relevant to the question in hand because of Clement, and especially Origen, who was mentor to Pamphilus, who was mentor to Eusebius of Caesarea.

Eusebius (Caesarea)

One suspects that the forger who 'borrowed' Jerome actually started out by 'borrowing' Eusebius (Caesarea). He has Eusebius answering a certain 'Marinus' with, "One might say that the passage is not contained in all the copies of Mark's Gospel . . ." The 'not all' became 'some' or even 'many', here and there. If Eusebius actually wrote such a thing, of which we aren't sure [the interval of six centuries does not

inspire confidence here either], how was he qualified to do so? After the Roman destruction in 70 AD, Palestine became a backwater in the flow of the Christian river. The transmission of the true NT Text owes nothing to Caesarea. By the 4th century there would have been thousands, literally, of NT MSS in use around the world, of which Eusebius (d. 339, b. about 265) probably would not have seen more than a dozen (most from Alexandria, not Asia Minor). If Codex B was produced in Alexandria in time for Eusebius to see it, it would indeed permit him to say ‘not all’ copies; but why would he do so? And why should we pay any attention to him if he did? Here again, who in Palestine was still speaking Greek in the 4th century? What use would Eusebius have for Greek manuscripts? One other point: had Eusebius written such a thing, it would have been after Diocletian’s campaign, presumably, but it would still be fresh in his memory and he should have mentioned it. Emboldened by success, as I suppose, the forger decided to ‘up the ante’ attributing the same exchange to Jerome, answering a certain ‘Hebidia’, except that now it is ‘most’ or ‘almost all’.

Jerome (Bethlehem)

Jerome was born around 342 and died in 420 (or so). During 382-384 he was secretary to Pope Damasus, in Rome, and began work on the Latin Vulgate. Not long after the death of Damasus (384) he moved to Bethlehem, followed a few months later by the wealthy Paula, who helped him build a monastery, and so on. Jerome spent the last 30+ years of his life in Bethlehem, even more of a ‘backwater’ than Caesarea, and a century after Eusebius. All the negative observations made about Caesarea apply here with added force. Further, who in the Pope’s entourage in Rome was speaking Greek in 380 AD? From Rome Jerome moved to Bethlehem. How many actual Greek MSS of the NT would Jerome have seen? Certainly fewer than 1% of the total in use (at that time there would be few Greek MSS in Italy and Palestine—who would use them?). In lists of early Church ‘fathers’ Jerome is usually listed with those who wrote in Latin, not Greek. The statement attributed to him is patently false, scientifically impossible; and he would have been ridiculously unqualified to make it. Not being stupid or dishonest, he didn’t!

Addendum

After I circulated the above as my ‘mailing 75’, my Canadian friend, Charles Holm, called my attention to historical research done by Timothy David Barnes that is relevant to the credibility of Jerome (*Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). In an appendix dealing specifically with Jerome, there is a section called “Jerome and Eusebius” wherein Barnes offers the following observations (pages 236-238).

First, Jerome never questions the reliability of Eusebius. Thus he accepts Eusebius’ interpretation of what a writer says without asking whether it is correct.

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Secondly, Jerome far surpasses Eusebius in credulity. What was in Eusebius presented as surmise or mere rumour is for Jerome established and indubitable fact.

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Thirdly, Jerome mistranslates and misunderstands.

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Fourthly, Jerome dishonestly conceals both his ignorance and his debt to Eusebius.

Well, well, well, it appears that one should read Jerome with a full salt shaker to hand. Perhaps my closing sentence above should have been: Not being stupid, he didn’t! However, I continue to insist that Jerome could not have been so grossly stupid and/or dishonest as to make the ridiculous statement attributed to him. Down with **forgery!**¹

¹ For detailed documentation and an exhaustive discussion of other aspects of this question, see Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses according to S. Mark*, pp. 19-31, 38-69, 265-90.