Qeios

Peer Review

Review of: "The Great Expansion: Proto-Mark and the Pro-Gentile Enlargement of Canonical Mark"

J. David Stark[1]

1. Faulkner University, Montgomery, United States

As I'm posting this, I see that there's a further version of the manuscript now ready. I regret that I'm unable to update this review to reflect the details of that version, but I'm hopeful you'll still find some of it useful as you continue working on the project. Thanks so much for working in public and for the chance to engage with this stage of this project!

The essay offers an interesting hypothesis about Luke's "Great Omission" of nearly all material from Mark 6:45–8:26. In this section, there is a consistently pro-gentile theme, which would have been consistent with Luke's narrative and theological emphases. Surely, Luke would not have omitted this material if he had it in his version of Mark, and random damage to Luke's copy of Mark cannot have been expected to have confined itself to such a thematically coherent unit that is literarily bounded by references to Bethsaida (see Mark 6:45 and 8:22–26). The essay, therefore, argues that Luke's omission of this material is evidence that Luke worked from a form of proto-Mark where this material was absent.

This general arc of the essay's argument is intriguing and has some promise. But this form of the argument has several difficulties.

1. Length

The essay is quite long. In itself, length isn't a problem, but not all sections of the essay contribute equally strongly (or even particularly materially) toward its principal thesis. For instance, §4 (pp. 19–36) is more narrative- than source-critical. The section includes some good observations about Mark but probably works better as a separate essay. Sections 5–6 are more pertinent but could probably be strengthened by distilling their discussion down to briefer forms containing the most essential elements.

doi.org/10.32388/Q0S90R

2. Interaction with Secondary Literature

For its length, the essay has very little interaction with secondary literature. If I bracket out references to works that you've written also, that interaction is still sparser. There are a number of places in which and angles from which the essay's argument is weaker for this absence.

3. Shaping Source-Critical Imagination with Text-Critical Observations

Two, for example, arise from the angle of textual criticism. First, the essay has overly specific ideas about "what one would expect" about later insertions (e.g., p. 3)—namely, that they would be integrated into the narrative at a single splice point. There's an obvious logic to this suggestion, but the logic is not universal. Therefore, it is doubtful this expectation can carry the weight the essay places on it.

One example is the story of the Woman Caught in Adultery. Various factors mark this story as a later addition to the Fourfold Gospel. And when added, it was kept together (consistent with the essay's expectation), but it was added in different places.

> Most copyists apparently thought that it would interrupt John's narrative least if it were inserted after 7:52 (D E (F) G H K M U Γ Π 28 700 892 al). Others placed it after 7:36 (ms. 225) or after 7:44 (several Georgian mss) or after 21:25 (1 565 1076 1570 1582 arm) or after Lk 21:38 (*f* 13). (see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 187–89)

That is, splicing the story in at different places in John (or Luke!) or placing it at the end of John were all viable options for handling the story of the Woman Caught in Adultery.

By analogy, Mark's placement of "Great Omission" material does make sense. But even assuming that "Great Omission" material does not go back to proto-Mark, this material could, in principle, have been inserted elsewhere or appended to rather than spliced into that other text. Like the Woman Caught in Adultery, it may have been natural enough for "Great Omission" material to move as a block, but that fact alone tells us little about what would be natural to happen with that block, where it would be placed, and how it might be preserved.

Second, on p. 15, the essay raises the matter of Mark's ending to dispute the hypothesis that a damaged, early manuscript of Mark could explain Luke's "Great Omission." The text summarizes,

> It has occasionally been suggested that the abrupt ending at Mark 16:8 reflects similar physical damage to the gospel's autograph. Whatever the merits of that proposal in its own context, it cannot be enlisted in support of the omission view here, and indeed creates a difficulty for it. *The supposed damage at 16:8 is what the entire surviving tradition transmits — every manuscript ends at that point* — whereas the supposed damage at 6:45–8:26 is not what the tradition transmits, since canonical Mark and Matthew alike preserve the block. (italics added)

As the text currently reads, the italicized claim is simply false. Not only is it untrue that "every manuscript" of Mark "ends at" 16:8, but it is also the case that *most* manuscripts of Mark *do not* end at 16:8.

Perhaps Mark's initial text did end at 16:8, as the text does in some witnesses, and perhaps this ending was then expanded and that expanded version then transmitted by most surviving manuscripts. That can all be argued, but the diffusion of Mark's longer ending(s) through the surviving manuscripts is itself nearly the exact opposite of what the essay indicates. Damage to Luke's text of Mark may still not explain the "Great Omission," but the essay's argument against this possibility is weakened by this factual problem.

4. Expectations of Luke

Similarly, the essay's argument leans overly much on a particular hypothesis about what Luke could be expected to do or not do with the "Great Omission" material. Perhaps he would have included it if he had access to it, and perhaps his not doing so suggests that he did not have access to it. But I see nothing in the essay's discussion of the "deliberate omission" hypothesis that sufficiently discounts this possibility. True, there are elements within the "Great Omission" material that would have further developed characteristically Lukan themes. But however "pro-gentile" this material is, articulating a "pro-gentile" view is hardly Luke's principal theme; creating a certain portrayal of Jesus is (see Keener, *Christobiography*). So, it is no particularly strong argument for the essay's thesis to say that "Great Omission" material would have supported Luke's "pro-gentile" theme. Perhaps he wanted to pursue that theme differently, or perhaps he only used some of the material he knew that would support and develop this theme, or perhaps he wanted to balance this theme's development with that of others. His gospel could, after all, not go on forever (cf. John 21:25).

5. Bethsaida

The essay does well to raise the point about how references to Bethsaida bracket Mark's "Great Omission" material. But one can reasonably tell a story, for instance, about how Israel entered Canaan after coming up out of Egypt while condensing the details of the wilderness wanderings. Similarly, imagining that Luke had something like canonical Mark that included this material, it seems unclear why Luke could not have found it convenient to condense the Bethsaida cycle. Yes, there is good material in that cycle, but Luke seems to be at no shortage of good material elsewhere. So, perhaps the Bethsaida cycle seemed to him less important to include than material that he enlarges elsewhere. On this kind of dynamic, see, e.g., pp. 10–13, 16–19.

In sum, the essay's core idea is intriguing, and I'd definitely encourage you to pursue it further along lines that might address some of these challenges or lingering questions that remain after working through this version.

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.