

Mark and Miracle (Mark 16:17–18)

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Introduction

The ending of the Gospel of Mark has raised questions for 2,000 years; it is not a modern question by any means.¹ Today it is an almost universal consensus of textual critics that Mark 16:9–20 is not the original ending of Mark’s Gospel.² Likewise NT scholars agree that the textual critics have established their case in this regard.³ That case is based on both external⁴ and internal⁵ evidence—evidence that I accept as substantive and adequate. Therefore I do not accept Mark 16:9–20 as part of canonical Scripture.⁶

¹ One of the earliest explicit comments about the question is Jerome (5th C.): “Almost all the Greek copies do not have this concluding portion” (*Epist. cxx.3 ad Hedibiam*). But the question may be traced further back. Itala^k (Old Latin codex Bobbiensis, a 4/5th C. MS) is thought to reflect a 2d C. Greek text and it contains the “Short Ending” in place of Mark 16:9–20. Even manuscripts which *do* have the “Long Ending” often contain critical notes suggesting that it is not likely original. E.g., MS 1 (minuscule MS, 12th C.) inserts this note between vv. 8 and 9: ἐν τισὶ μὲν τῶν ἀντιγραφῶν ἕως ᾧδε πληροῦται ὁ εὐαγγελιστῆς ἕως οὗ καὶ Εὐσεβίου ὁ Παμφίλου ἐκανόνισεν· ἐν πολλοῖς δὲ καὶ ταῦτα φέρεται (“On the one hand, in some of the copies the Evangelist ends at this point as Eusebius of Pamphilus [4th C.] also judges; but in many [copies] these [words] also are included”).

² The only text critic that I know who would argue for the originality of Mark 16:9–20 is Maurice Robinson. I am defining “textual critic” at a level considerably higher than people with an opinion about particular textual issues; I am also distinguishing that term from “NT scholar.” (I explicitly demur from being included in the category of “NT textual critic”; I know enough about the field to understand some of what is involved—and enough to know that I do not possess the requisite qualifications.) The best modern survey of the question is *Perspectives on the Ending of Mark: 4 Views*, ed. David Alan Black (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008); not all the contributors are text critics, but several are.

³ The best way to document this claim is to consult the major commentaries on Mark published in the last hundred years. Not one of them argues for the originality of Mark 16:9–20. This list would include Gould (ICC), Swete, Bruce (EGT), Cranfield (CGTC), Taylor, Lane (NICNT), Gundry, Guelich (WBC), Edwards (Pillar), Evans (WBC), France (NIGTC), Collins (Hermeneia), and Stein (BECNT). The list could be extended, but these are the commentaries that, for the most part, attempt to interact explicitly with the Greek text.

⁴ The external evidence, in summary: the majority of MSS do include the long ending, but the oldest do not. (Unfortunately, there are no papyri extant for Mark 16.) The wide variation of other endings and various combinations are all evidence for ending at v. 8; i.e., it best explains the origins of the other variants.

⁵ For an extensive study of the internal evidence see the relevant section of *Mark: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek NT (Waco, Tex.: Baylor Univ. Press, forthcoming 2014?).

⁶ I cannot work out all the implications and entailments of that conclusion here. For a discussion of some of them, see my forthcoming volume on Mark in the Baylor Handbook on the Greek NT series. As a grammatical handbook, there are limits to what can be said in this regard, but the basics should be clear.

Kelhoffer has argued persuasively that this early Christian text originated in the second century, particularly sometime between AD 120 and AD 150.⁷ The essence of his argument assumes several things. First, that the external and internal evidence adequately justifies the conclusion that the Long Ending is not original. Second, that the Gospels first began to circulate as a collection no later than about AD 120.⁸ Third, there is adequate internal evidence for the literary unity of the Long Ending as we know it; i.e., it is neither a collection of or from other writings (e.g., the canonical Gospels, though there are numerous allusions to them), nor an edited version of an earlier text.⁹ Fourth, that there is patristic evidence of knowledge of the Long Ending by AD 150.¹⁰

In one sense such a conclusion voids the need for a cessationist consideration of the infamous text in the Long Ending that appears to condone an ongoing promise of exorcism, tongues, snake handling, and the drinking of poison (16:17–18).¹¹ If that were the entire story, then we could adjourn now and observe that Rod has presented the shortest paper of his academic career. But most of you probably know me well enough by now to realize that I would not be content with a one-page paper on just about any topic!

There is, however, another angle on this question that may be profitable to pursue for our present purposes. *Assuming* that I am correct in assessing the textual issue in Mark 16 (if you disagree, then you are on your own to sort out the issues!), what does it tell us about cessationism? In particular, what do the later endings tell us about how the early

⁷ James Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark*, WUNT 2.112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 157–244, summary on 243.

⁸ “The comparison of the NT Gospels and the decision by the [Long Ending’s] author that the end of Mark was deficient were only possible at a time when the four Gospels had been *collected and compared with one another*” (ibid., 155, emphasis original). The rationale for AD 120 is discussed in an appendix to this paper.

⁹ See chs. 2 and 3 of Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*.

¹⁰ The Long Ending appears to be known by the following 2nd C. writers: Justin Martyr (ca. AD 155–61; e.g., 1 *Apol.* 45.5 reflects Mark 16:20), Tatian (ca. AD 172; the *Diatessaron* assumes 16:9–20), and by Irenaeus (ca. AD 180; *Haer.* 3.9–12 quotes Mark 16:19). The probable date of the Long Ending could be narrowed to AD 120–40 if it were possible to date the pseudepigraphal work, *The Acts of Pilate*, with any certainty (it is not) since it quotes Mark 16:15–19 almost verbatim; this is the longest such citation from the Long Ending in any second century text. For detail, including the text of the citations, see Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 169–77.

¹¹ It is interesting that when contemporary non-cessationists argue for their position *in an academic setting*, they seldom appeal to the Long Ending. For example, in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? 4 Views*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), there are only a few passing references to verses in the Long Ending (assuming the Scripture index is complete), all by non-cessationists (Robert Saucy, C. Samuel Storms, and Douglas Oss), but none of them use it as the basis for an argument as is common in non-academic discussions and among poorly trained advocates. That is perhaps not surprising since even in cessationist circles the authenticity of the Long Ending is commonly assumed since it is in the KJV without note or comment.

church viewed such matters?¹² Working from the assumption that the Long Ending was written in the second century, what was the author’s perspective on cessationism? That is, what did he expect in terms of the miraculous gifts listed in vv. 17–18? What was their purpose? Asking these questions is not the same as asking what is the *biblical* answer to those questions, but what did this second century Christian think about them? His answers might correlate well with what we know of such matters from the canonical NT, or he may have had a divergent view.

The Description of Mark 16:17–18

The key text in the Long Ending is vv. 17–18, σημεία δὲ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ταῦτα παρακολουθήσει· ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου δαιμόνια ἐκβαλοῦσιν, γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καιναῖς, ¹⁸καὶ ἐν ταῖς χερσὶν ὄφεις ἀροῦσιν κἂν θανάσιμόν τι πίωσιν οὐ μὴ αὐτοὺς βλάβῃ, ἐπὶ ἀρρώστους χεῖρας ἐπιθήσουσιν καὶ καλῶς ἔξουσιν (“these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will exorcise demons, speak in new tongues, ¹⁸pick up snakes with their hands, and if they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well”).¹³

There are several things worth noting. First, these statements are predicated of “those who believe” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν).

Second, there are five specific actions that are attributed to believers:

- Exorcism
- Speaking in tongues
- Picking up snakes
- Drinking poison without harm
- Healing

There is little debate as to the referent of these five items. One thing that is not explicit is that picking up snakes is assumed to mean, “picking up without harm” (perhaps to be implied from the following statement regarding drinking poison, though it is not grammatically connected). Another ambiguity is that it is not said whether one drinks poison¹⁴ voluntarily or involuntarily, though the parallel with the other four signs suggests that a voluntary action is intended. Given that all five signs are listed in parallel

¹² My interest in this question was first stimulated by Kelhoffer’s *Miracle and Mission*. As will be obvious, I have mined the massive amount of data in Kelhoffer’s work, though selectively and with quite different presuppositions than those which guided his work. I have also supplemented his research with my own. As a result, I suggest some conclusions that differ from Kelhoffer and others which agree or are similar.

¹³ All translations of ancient texts are my own unless noted otherwise.

¹⁴ The text does not use a specific term for poison such as ἰός, but an adjective, θανάσιμος, “deadly,” used substantivally with the indefinite pronoun τι.

with no indication otherwise, it would be precarious to suggest that one (or more) is to be taken metaphorically if the others are not.¹⁵

Let us begin our evaluation with the identification of “those who believe” (τοῖς πιστεύουσιν). This might refer to Christians in general, i.e., believers/the regenerate, or it might refer to Christians who have the faith that God will perform a miracle.¹⁶ Although πιστεύω could refer to either (cf. John 1:12 and Matt 9:28 respectively), the exclusive use in the NT of the plural substantival participle as a referent to a group of people (and almost always of the singular form as well) appears to be a synonym for saved people, i.e., the Righteous (in an OT/Gospels context) or Christians (in a post-Pentecost context).¹⁷ Even apart from the grammatical evidence, the meaning of πιστεύω should be defined by the immediate context; LEA¹⁸ has just referred to those who believe as being saved (v. 16, ὁ πιστεύσας καὶ βαπτισθεὶς σωθήσεται). There is no change in referent to be found in the white space between vv. 16 and 17.

Second, it appears that LEA drew a very tight connection between the miracles listed and those who believe. By specifying that these signs (σημεῖα ταῦτα) will *accompany* (παρακολουθήσει) those who believe (v. 17), he appears to assume two things, first, that all believers will perform miracles, and second, that all believers will perform all such miracles. The third singular verb (παρακολουθήσει) is used with a neuter plural subject (σημεῖα), thus treating the subject as a collective whole¹⁹—the group of miracles will be performed by all those (plural) who believe. Though it might be argued that not all the group will perform all the miracles, grammatically this does not stand scrutiny.²⁰ As stated by LEA, the two are co-extensive.²¹

Third, the purpose for these five items is to serve as a sign (σημεῖα) of the gospel. The paragraph is introduced with a variation of the Great Commission (v. 15) and the promise of salvation for those who believe (v. 16). The signs listed are said to

¹⁵ Some try to avoid the problems here by making the snakes or the poison to be metaphorical references even though they content that the others are not. See Robert Gromacki, *The Modern Tongues Movement* (Philadelphia: P & R, 1967), 76, for a critique of Oral Robert’s attempt in this direction.

¹⁶ For an analysis of a common Pentecostal argument that this refers to a Christian’s faith in the Lordship of Jesus, see Gromacki, *Modern Tongues Movement*, 71–72, 75 (though I would question his appeal to the aorist tense as proof in his response).

¹⁷ The singular substantival participle is used to refer to a believer who has faith in something God will do, though perhaps only in Luke 1:45; even the singular is, however, overwhelmingly used as a synonym for a person who has saving faith.

¹⁸ For economy I will refer to the “Long Ending’s Author” as LEA, which I will pronounce as “Lee” in the oral presentation of this paper.

¹⁹ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 399–400.

²⁰ When a plural substantival participle is followed in the next clause by a third plural verb with a similar referent, the parties are identical. E.g., using Mark as a sample, see 12:40 οἱ κατεσθίοντες τὰς οἰκίας τῶν χηρῶν ... οὗτοι λήμψονται περισσότερον κρίμα (see also 5:14; 6:31; 9:31; 10:42).

²¹ Kelhoffer comes to the same conclusion (*Miracle and Mission*, 246).

accompany (παρακολουθέω) *those who believe*. This is confirmed in the subsequent historical note that ἐκεῖνοι δὲ ἐξεληθόντες ἐκήρυξαν πανταχοῦ, τοῦ κυρίου συνεργούντος καὶ τὸν λόγον βεβαιούντος διὰ τῶν ἐπακολουθούντων σημείων (“they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with [them] and confirmed the message by accompanying signs,” v. 20). These miraculous signs do not accompany those who *preach* the Gospel, but those who *believe*. The disciples (the Eleven) are the ones said to be preaching in v. 20, “going out, they preached everywhere.”²² The signs, however, are not said to be performed by the Eleven.

Fourth, there is no hint of any temporal limitation. The sign function of these miracles by those who believe is set in parallel with the commission to preach the good news. It will not do to limit the reference by insisting that the text refers to “those who have believed,” meaning the disciples. First, there were far more than the Eleven who had believed by the time of the Ascension; if the text means those who have previously believed, then all such believers receive these abilities. Second, this cannot be predicated on the aorist participle.²³ The reference of the aorist (perfective aspect) is simply to “those who believe” as almost all modern translations agree.²⁴ Although I would argue that the aorist (indicative or participle) can refer to any time reference,²⁵ even the older view of the verb does not find absolute time outside the indicative. Rather it would have been argued by earlier grammarians that the aorist participle refers to antecedent action—antecedent to the main verb. In this case the *future* tense παρακολουθήσει. This, however, is a substantival participle which functions as a dative complement (i.e., direct object), not an adverbial participle, so the temporal reference is even less pronounced. As noted above, this is a categorical description of believers (whenever they believe).

²² The referent shifted back from “those who believed” in vv. 17–18 to those to whom Jesus spoke immediately prior to the Ascension in v. 19, i.e., the disciples.

²³ William Kelly appears to do this, though he does not use grammatical terminology; likely it is based simply on Darby’s English translation (*An Exposition of the Gospel of Mark* [London: Race, 1907], 225). R. A. Heubner makes the same argument with reference to Kelly and probably on the same basis: “‘Those that have believed’ refers to the apostles” (*The Word of God Versus the ‘Charismatic Renewal* [Morganville, NJ: Present Truth, 1988], 118). Darby’s translation of Mark 16:17a reads, “And these signs shall follow those that have believed”; KJV reads, “And these signs shall follow them that believe.”

²⁴ The only modern version that does not use “those who believe” (or a very close equivalent) is NASB, and that translation is noted (but not to be commended!) for a very mechanical translation of tenses. The result is exactly what is seen here: those without Greek abilities read far too much into the English wording despite it being unjustified in Greek.

²⁵ See my *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, *Studies in Biblical Greek* 10 (New York: Lang, 2001).

A Comparison with Other NT References

There are some parallels in the NT with the five signs of Mark 16. Exorcisms are not frequent in the NT.²⁶ Most such references are to Jesus' work (e.g., Mark 1:21–27, 32–34; 3:11–12, 22–30; 5:1–20; 9:14–29). The only notable instances of Jesus' followers exorcising demons are the two times that Jesus sent them out on their own, e.g., Mark 6:6, 13 (the Sending of the Twelve) and Luke 10:1–17 (the Sending of the 72). When the Twelve are first selected we are told that the purpose of their appointment included exorcism (Mark 3:14–15). On another occasion the disciples rebuked someone outside the Twelve for exorcism (Mark 9:38).²⁷

Healings are proportioned likewise: most are references to Jesus' healings (so common as to need no citations) with only a very few instances of the disciples doing something similar. Only in the Sending of the Twelve are we told that they “anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (Mark 6:12).

On the Day of Pentecost “the apostles” (τῶν ἀποστόλων, unidentified, but implying all of them?) are said to have done “both many wonders and signs” (πολλά τε τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα, Acts 2:43). Following the Day of Pentecost there are several general references to the apostles (again unidentified) performing healings (5:12–16) and this included some exorcisms (v. 16). Paul and Barnabas performed “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα) on the first missionary journey (14:3; 15:12), but no specifics are recorded as part of this reference. A similar general reference is noted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus (19:11–12), described as “extraordinary miracles” (δυνάμεις τε οὐ τὰς τυχούσας, “miracles, but not the ordinary kind”) that included both healings and exorcisms. In addition to these general statements, the following records of miracles by individual apostles are given in Acts.

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|-------|---|
| Peter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healed a lame man (3:1–10) • healed Aeneas (9:33–35) • raised Dorcas/Tabitha from the dead (9:36–41) |
| Paul | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • healed a lame man in Lystra (14:8–10) • exorcised a demon from a fortune teller in Philippi (16:16–18) • raised Eutychius from the dead (20:10) • healed the father of Publius (28:7–8) • healed “the rest of the sick” on the island of Malta (28:9) |

²⁶ For purposes of length most of this section surveys only Mark. A more exhaustive study would, I think, find that the other Gospels record similar data in this regard.

²⁷ We know very little about this situation. Was this unidentified person successful? Did the disciples themselves attempt to exorcise the demon, but fail? Did they succeed in actually stopping this person, or only attempt to do so?

The only historical records of miracles of healing or exorcism performed in the early church by someone other than the apostles are Stephen (Acts 6:8, τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα μεγάλα), Philip's ministry in Samaria (Acts 8:6–7, 13, τε σημεῖα καὶ δυνάμεις μεγάλας),²⁸ and the single event of Ananias' restoration of Saul's sight (Acts 9:17–18).²⁹ Some references outside historical narrative can also be noted. In Paul's summary reference to his work as a minister to the Gentiles (Rom 15:15–22) he refers to having done “signs and wonders” (σημείων καὶ τεράτων, v. 19). There is also a passing reference to miracles done among the Galatian believers (Gal 3:5), presumably by Paul, though that is not stated. Beyond that we have a passing note that Paul “demonstrated the marks of an apostle: signs, wonders and miracles” (σημείους τε καὶ τέρασιν καὶ δυνάμεσιν, 2 Cor 12:12). Likewise the unknown author of Hebrews refers to “signs, wonders and various miracles” (σημείους τε καὶ τέρασιν καὶ ποικίλαις δυνάμεσιν) performed by the first generation of Christians (Heb 2:3–4). The explicit sequence in the text (the Lord > those who heard > us: διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ὑπὸ τῶν ἀκουσάντων εἰς ἡμᾶς) implies that it was the apostles (those who heard Jesus) who performed these miracles.³⁰

If this reference to healing is to be normative as many claim, then the details are also normative. In this instance believers are instructed to place their hands on those who are sick in order to effect healing. This can be paralleled in various NT healings, but the practice is not consistent. Jesus sometimes placed his hands on the sick before healing them (e.g., Mark 1:41), other times he did not (e.g., Mark 5:27–29; Matt 8:5–13), and in other instances we are not told (e.g., Mark 1:34). Likewise with the apostles in Acts both patterns are evident.³¹ It seems quite odd that in light of the great diversity of practice in

²⁸ The exception from the normal apostolic pattern in Acts 8 formed a critical part in assuring that there would not be a division in the church similar to the Jew/Samaritan rift. Also note that tongues were not said to be a part of the Samaritan experience, probably because there was no need since everyone involved probably spoke Aramaic and/or Greek. Charismatics often assume that tongues were present in Acts 8 (e.g., Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles*, 2nd ed. [Tulsa, Okla.: Word and Spirit Press, 2011], 66–67, though on 190–91 he attempts to mollify the obvious problem of non-mention by defining the Acts 8 event as an “utterance gift” rather than tongues specifically, though he still includes tongues in this larger category).

²⁹ The reference in James 5:14–15 is not relevant here since that is not portrayed as a gift of healing. It is rather God's answer to prayer, and there is no doubt (at least in my mind!) that God can bring such healing if he so chooses.

³⁰ “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will” (2:3–4). The implication is that the “signs, wonders and various miracles” were what served to confirm the gospel. These signs, then, were performed by the first generation of believers, observed by those who would become the second generation of the church.

³¹ In Acts 3:7 Peter takes the man by the hand, but this is to help him up; this may or may not qualify as “placing hands on him.” In Acts 9:40 the clear implication is that Peter did not touch the person; she is restored to life *before* he takes her by the hand in v. 41 (cf. Acts 14:8–10). No mention of placing hands is made in Acts 9:33–35. The healing miracles mentioned in Acts 19:12 does not involve placing hands on the sick or even the presence of the healer (Paul); the “handkerchiefs and aprons” employed are not

the Gospels and Acts that placing hands on someone is now to be required in Mark 16:18—yet that is what the text explicitly says. If someone is to claim this as normative, then the instructions must be included. Nor are there exceptions implied or allowed. The entire paragraph is couched in future tense verbs: they *will* place their hands on the sick and they *will* be healed (καλῶς ἔξουσιν, the future of ἔχω). Though the future tense has a wider range of usage than simple prediction, that appears to be the tenor of this passage. Jesus is telling the disciples what will happen in the future.

There are no instances of “speaking with new tongues” in the Gospels, though there is on the Day of Pentecost.³² Exactly who it was who spoke at that time is not clear. Acts 2 indicates only that “all of them” spoke. This would be at least the Twelve; it could also refer to the larger group of 120 (1:15). The only other such historical records are those of Cornelius’ house (10:46) and the twelve Ephesian disciples of John the Baptist (19:6).³³

As for picking up snakes in Mark 16:18, there are few parallels. The only similar statement in the Gospels is Jesus’ comment to his disciples that “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions even to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you” (Luke 10:19). The Lukan promise is a somewhat enigmatic reference. The immediate context is the return of the 72 rejoicing that the demons had submitted to them. This is followed by Jesus’ reference to Satan falling from heaven, then the authority statement, and concludes with Jesus’ rebuke that they should not rejoice that the spirits submit to them. In that setting, the nature of trampling on snakes and scorpions is not clear. It is more likely a metaphorical reference to Satan and his hosts³⁴ rather than a physical reference promising that the disciples could step on poisonous animals with impunity.³⁵ This would assume an assensive καί (“even,” see the

deliberately touched by Paul; rather we are told that they had touched him (ἀποφέρεσθαι ἀπὸ τοῦ χρωτὸς αὐτοῦ, “to touch his skin”), a situation perhaps similar to Mark 5:27–29. Paul went well beyond “placing hands” in Acts 20:10. The only specific instance of healing in Acts which explicitly mentions placing hands on the sick is 28:8.

³² The instances cited in the paragraph above are the only historical accounts of tongues speaking, though Paul’s theological account notes that there was tongues speaking of some sort in Corinth. Paul also points out that he spoke in tongues “more than all of you” (1 Cor 14:18).

³³ It is perhaps curious that tongues are not treated in the NT in the same manner as other miracles. Though they can certainly be described as “miracles” for a theological perspective, I am not aware of any NT text that describes them in the usual terms for miracles: σημεῖα, τέρατα, or δυνάμεις. The closest to any such reference is the explanation in 1 Cor 14:22 that “tongues are a sign” (αἱ γλῶσσαι εἰς σημεῖόν εἰσιν), but this is an inferential statement indicating the purpose of tongues, not a description of tongues as part of the σημεῖον group. Kelhoffer notes the same relationship, observing that tongues “are not typically associated with other wonders” (*Miracle and Mission*, 266). This impacts his study to the point that he treats tongues separately from miracles.

³⁴ There are a number of examples in Second Temple literature of snakes or scorpions serving as metaphors for Satan or demons (see the references in Marshall in the next note).

³⁵ Agreeing that this is a metaphorical reference are E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 2nd ed., NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 157; Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids:

translation given above). This is particularly so in light of the immediately following statement that “nothing will harm you”—a statement that cannot be taken physically without explicit qualifications, but none are given. Outside the Gospels the only parallel is the record of the events at the close of Paul’s voyage to Rome. On the island of Malta where he was shipwrecked, Paul was not harmed when bitten by a poisonous snake (28:3–6).³⁶ There is no evidence of any Jewish or early Christian background of physical “snake handling” and no “direct line of influence” from any of many possible Greco-Roman sources, though “the imagery of picking up serpents belongs to a larger Hellenistic milieu.”³⁷

More can be said about drinking poison since it is a widespread theme in both previous and subsequent texts,³⁸ though none in the OT or NT.³⁹ The best known instance of drinking poison in antiquity is, of course, the Socratic death penalty of poison hemlock (Plato, *Apol.*, 33), though this has the opposite result of that anticipated by LEA—which could be his point: Christianity is superior to Greco-Roman paganism, though there is no explicit association other than drinking poison. A closer parallel is the story of Odysseus and Circe in the *Odyssey* (10.136–399). Here the hero is aided by the god Hermes who gives him an antidote to the “evil potion” (κακὰ φάρμακ’) which Odysseus will receive from the goddess Circe. Mark 16:18, of course, says nothing about an antidote. Although much older than the NT and the 2nd C. Long Ending, it was part of the common folklore of the ancient world. There is a parallel in the pseudepigrapha, which may predate the Long Ending. *The Testament of Joseph* (2nd C. BC?) recounts a substantial expansion of the Potiphar’s wife’s enticements in which Joseph eats food ἐν

Eerdmans, 1952), 302; I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 429; and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, [1922]), 279–80. A physical reference that is representative of the enemy is proposed by Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, 2 vols., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994–96), 2:1007–8; and David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 429.

³⁶ This event is often cited as a “fulfillment” of Mark 16:18, but it is not clear that is the case since Paul neither picked up (Mark 16) nor stepped on (Luke 10) the snake. More likely it was the event in Acts that suggested the similar reference to the unknown second century author of the Long Ending.

³⁷ Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 409; see his extensive exploration of possible backgrounds on pp. 340–416, leading to a largely negative conclusion as to any sort of influence or background. He also gives an interesting summary of 20th–21st C. American snake handling, a practice ostensibly based on Mark 16:18, but one that is not only divergent in purpose and function from that 2nd C. text, but also of recent origin, dating only from 1910 (411–15), with no evidence of any such practice by Christians from the 1st to the very early 20th C. (415–16). For this historical origins of the practice in 1910 Kelhoffer cites Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 92. Covington identifies George Went Hensley of Sale Creek, Tenn. as the first person to initiate the modern practice of snake handling.

³⁸ The digest here is a highly selective summary from Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, ch. 7 (pp. 417–72).

³⁹ The closest possible parallels in the OT are the water of testing (Num 5) and Elijah’s making the poisonous stew safe to eat (2 Kings 4). These are not, however, very close parallels since there are significant differences in each case.

γοητεία πεφυραμένον, “mixed with drugs/in sorcery” (*T. Jos.* 6.1) with no ill effects. Early Christian literature also has its poison stories. Eusebius records Papias’ report of Justus/Joseph Barsabbas (see Acts 1:23) who drank poison, but did not die.⁴⁰ Hippolytus, a Roman theologian/pastor (early 3rd C.), writes in his *Apostolic Tradition* (32.1) that the Eucharist, if taken in faith, would serve as an antidote for poison. “The earliest surviving narrative of an apostle drinking poison in order to convert others”⁴¹ is found in *Virtutes Iohannis* and *Passio Iohannis*, Latin works of uncertain date.⁴² In these accounts John faces off with Aristodemus, the pagan priest of Artemis, in Ephesus. John drinks poison without ill effect and also raises two men from the dead who had died from drinking the same poison. As a result, both Aristodemus and the Roman proconsul in Ephesus are converted. A similar story concerning John is told in a different setting (a trial before the emperor Domitian) in the *Acts of John in Rome*. Significant in this account is that the words of Mark 16:18b are said to be quoted by John,⁴³ suggesting that the unknown author made an explicit connection between the Long Ending and this apocryphal story about John. Although none of these stories are to be treated as historical records, they do reflect the fact that some early Christians were enamored by the poison promise of the Long Ending, more so than the promise related to picking up snakes which has no such apocryphal history in the early church. There is not, however, any historical evidence of a “community of poison bibbers” who routinely sought to demonstrate their faith in this manner.⁴⁴ This summary does point out that the Long Ending has more in common with the perspectives of the 2nd–6th centuries than with the NT.

Kelhoffer suggests that the closest parallel to the perspective on miracles in the Long Ending is found in the promise of the believer doing “greater works” than Jesus (ὁ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ τὰ ἔργα ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ κάκεινος ποιήσει καὶ μείζονα τούτων ποιήσει, John 14:12).⁴⁵ There have been a variety of explanations for this enigmatic statement. Some commentators would agree with Kelhoffer in finding here a reference to believers performing miracles,⁴⁶ but others demur. Carson has provided one of the best

⁴⁰ καὶ αὖ πάλιν ἕτερον παράδοξον περὶ Ἰουστον τὸν ἐπικληθέντα Βαρσαβᾶν γεγονός, ὡς δηλητήριον φάρμακον ἐμπιόντος καὶ μηδὲν ἀηδὲς διὰ τὴν τοῦ Κυρίου χάριν ὑπομείναντος (Eusebius, *Hist.*, 3.39.9). Though Eusebius writes in the 4th C., Papias is slightly earlier (b. before AD 70, d. AD 155?) than the probable date of the Long Ending (AD 120–50) and was still active at that time. Essentially the same story is also told by Philip of Side (5th C. AD).

⁴¹ Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 450.

⁴² Dates ranging from the 3rd to 6th C. have been proposed.

⁴³ Technically the reference occurs in one version of the *Acts of John in Rome*, secondary recension β, a somewhat later abridgement of the original (which might date anywhere from the 4th to the 6th C. AD).

⁴⁴ Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 470.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 264–66 (he equates ἔργα with “miracle”).

⁴⁶ E.g., Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:947, “thus disciples should do miraculous works through faith.... ‘greater’ works would imply greater magnitude than one has seen in Jesus’ earthly ministry.”

discussions of which I am aware. Though I might tweak the wording slightly, I think his explanation is the most satisfactory analysis.

In short, the works that the disciples perform after the resurrection are greater than those done by Jesus before his death insofar as the former belong to an age of clarity and power introduced by Jesus' sacrifice and exaltation.... in the wake of his glorification his followers will know and make known all that Jesus is and does, and their every deed and word will belong to the new eschatological age that will then have dawned. ... By contrast, the works believers are given to do through the power of the eschatological Spirit, *after* Jesus' glorification, will be set in the framework of Jesus' death and triumph, and will therefore more immediately and truly reveal the Son. Thus *greater things* is constrained by salvation-historical realities. ... The contrast itself, however, turns not on raw numbers but on the power and clarity that mushrooms after the eschatological hinge has swung and the new day has dawned.⁴⁷

If this is an appropriate analysis (and I think it is), then John 14:12 is not parallel with the view of miracles in the Long Ending. Only by concluding that this reference was to believers doing greater or more spectacular miracles than Jesus would there be a parallel.⁴⁸

The data summarized above suggest that there is a very different perception of the sort of miracles listed in Mark 16:17–18 and the historical pattern of the rest of the NT. Helzle expresses it as “an externalization in comparison with the usual message of the NT.”⁴⁹ The most obvious difference is that the NT pattern of miracles of healing, exorcism, and deadly harm are performed almost exclusively by Jesus and the apostles. There are only three explicit exceptions in which a non-apostle performed a miracle of healing (Acts 6, 8, 9), and these are all key figures or situations in the church; they do not portray routine activities of all Christians. The situation is somewhat different with tongues; though initially it is apostolic (Day of Pentecost), later instances are broader.⁵⁰ The perspective of LEA is much closer to that of other 2nd C. writers such as Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, all of whom refer to believers performing miracles (usually exorcisms, sometimes healings), but who say little or

⁴⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 496. The explanation of J. Ramsey Michaels (*The Gospel of John*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 779–81) is slightly different in emphasis, but tracks an interpretive trajectory similar to Carson.

⁴⁸ Michaels does point out this possible connection (“as is hinted, for example, in the longer ending of Mark, 16:16–18”), but rejects it as invalid (*Gospel of John*, 779–80).

⁴⁹ Eugen Helzle, “*Der Schluss des Markusevangeliums (Mk 16, 9–20) und das Freer-Logion (Mk 16, 14 W), ihre Tendenzen und ihr gegenseitiges Verhältnis: Eine wortexegetische Untersuchung*” (diss., Tübingen, 1959), 109, as cited by Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 247n6. The original text reads, “eine Veräußerlichung gegenüber der sonstigen ntl. Botschaft.”

⁵⁰ The explanation of this goes beyond the scope of this paper. It may be related to the distinct purpose of tongues as a fulfillment of OT prophecy (see 1 Cor 14:21–22).

nothing about apostolic miracles.⁵¹ The difference between the NT on the one hand and the Long Ending and 2nd C. writers on the other is “markedly different.”⁵² This argues for the 2nd C. origin of the Long Ending as opposed to it being part of Mark’s (first-century) Gospel.

Another difference relates to the extent of such miracles. LEA assumes that all who believe will perform all these miracles.⁵³ That, however, is contrary to the explicit statement of 1 Cor 12:29–30 which clearly denies that every Christian has the full range of gifts.⁵⁴ Though many interpreters assume otherwise, it may be that each believer received only one gift. This appears to be implied by 1 Peter 4:10–11 which refers to the reception of “a gift” (ἕκαστος καθὼς ἔλαβεν χάρισμα εἰς ἑαυτοὺς ἀπὸ διακονοῦντες, “as each one has received *a gift*, to one another minister *it...*”).⁵⁵ The subsequent examples in v. 11 list different individuals with differing sorts of gifts (εἴ τις λαλεῖ ... εἴ τις διακονεῖ), i.e., “if anyone speaks [= has a speaking gift] ... if anyone serves [= has a serving gift].”⁵⁶

Likewise the theological presuppositions of LEA seem to run counter to the normative flow of the NT. Elsewhere in the NT miracles are not emphasized. There are not really a great many miracles recorded in the history of the NT church. We have record of only 8 miracles by an apostle and 1 by someone who was not an apostle. There are other general references that miracles of some sort were performed (4 concerning the apostles, 2 non-apostles, plus 3 references in the epistles), but overall this is not a major emphasis of the NT.

Paul points out that it is the Jews who demanded σημεῖα—(miraculous) signs (1 Cor 1:22; cf. the specific example of this in John 6:30). In contrast, Paul emphasized the preaching of the gospel, and that despite the fact that he himself did, from time to time,

⁵¹ The 2nd and 3rd C. writers’ references to miracles is a subject well beyond the scope of this paper. Kelhoffer devotes a substantial section to these writers (*Miracle and Mission*, 310–39).

⁵² Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 338.

⁵³ Perhaps of note is that LEA does not describe these miracles in terms of “spiritual gifts.” They are simply the normal signs displayed, apparently, by all believers.

⁵⁴ The statements in 1 Cor 12:29–30 are phrased as rhetorical questions negated with μή. Grammatically this indicates that the author assumes a negative answer, e.g., μή πάντες ἀπόστολοι; (Are all apostles? No.).

⁵⁵ It might be possible to argue otherwise from χάρισμα alone (i.e., it might be qualitative), but the subsequent pronoun αὐτό is explicitly singular. The participle is imperatival, continuing the mood from v. 7, σωφρονήσατε καὶ νήψατε (see NET note, *ad loc.* and Wallace, *Grammar*, 650–51). Another relevant grammatical note is that this verse contains “a rare instance of the reflexive pronoun [ἑαυτοῦς] used like a reciprocal pronoun [i.e., ἀλλήλων]” (ibid., 351).

⁵⁶ This is not contradicted by the apostles performing multiple acts related to divergent gifts. It would appear that the gift of apostleship included a number of items (miracles, healing, exorcism, tongues, etc.) that were employed separately by those who were not apostles, i.e., in addition to their authority in the church, God used these individuals in a variety of ways to minister his grace (*The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], 159–60).

perform miracles. The message of Christ, the wisdom and power of God, took precedence over miracles (1 Cor 1:23). Paul also focused on an intelligible message that is able to edify the church rather than the more “spectacular” gifts such as tongues (1 Cor 14:2–19).⁵⁷ There are few mentions of miracles in Paul’s writings, only three explicit references in the entire Pauline corpus (Rom 15:15–22; 2 Cor 12:12; Gal 3:5).⁵⁸ Likewise in John’s Gospel: although it speaks much of Jesus’ miracles as signs (σημεῖα) in a positive sense (e.g., 20:30–31, though this is a reference to written accounts of miracles, not the observation of miracles firsthand), there are also numerous cautionary notes regarding interest in miracles for their own sake rather than as signs that lead to faith (e.g., 2:23–24; 6:32; 10:24–26; 12:37–40). This is not different from the historical flow of Scripture. Most of the OT is not characterized by miracles; they tend to occur in clusters (e.g., Moses/Joshua, Elijah/Elisha) and are not the normative expectation of the believer. That the NT “cluster” seems larger (Jesus and the apostles in the Gospels and Acts) does not mean that it has become ordinary and expected from that time forward. The importance of the ministry of Jesus, God’s ultimate, ἐν νῆϛ revelation, demands much greater scope in terms of textual length, so the impact of the miraculous seems consequently larger, but the miraculous does not thereby become normative for all believers.⁵⁹

Conclusion

It would seem from the evaluation above that the Long Ending was written by someone in the 2nd C. who did not have a good grasp of NT theology. He was probably “active at a time later than the points at which ... the NT writers wrote. In fact, he wrote closely to the time, and perhaps also to the situation, of apologists like Justin Martyr.”⁶⁰ He was

An individual who stood at a critical transitional period in the history of early Christian literature. At the time this author wrote, the four-Gospel canon was in the process of being

⁵⁷ This argument has even more force if MacArthur is correct that Paul distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate “tongues”/ecstatic speech in 1 Cor 14 by the use of singular (illegitimate) versus plural (legitimate), though even without that assumption, the argument based on relative value still holds.

⁵⁸ I am omitting discussion of 1 Cor 12–14 since it raises its own set of questions that I do not have time to address here. My primary goal is to consider the relationship of the Long Ending to the overall NT description of miracles. Someone else will have to address the question of how 1 Cor 12–14 fits into the uniform portrait of miracles in the rest of the NT. Though Kelhoffer makes assumptions and phrases the issue somewhat differently than I would, he does identify the question that is raised in 1 Cor 12–14: “Paul’s statement about certain Corinthian believers performing healings and other miracles in 1 Cor 12:9–10 constitutes a rare, early exception to this pattern [i.e., of miracles being apostolic] and, moreover, stands in tension with Paul’s other arguments concerning his own authority as a divinely-appointed wonder-worker” (*Miracle and Mission*, 338).

⁵⁹ This sort of internal, theological evidence would substantiate the textual conclusion, based on external evidence and internal grammatical evidence, that the Long Ending of Mark was not original and should not be treated as authoritative Scripture.

⁶⁰ Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission*, 339.

set, but had not been fixed to the point that at least one of these writings—in this instance, Mark—could not be modified or expanded. Given that this individual wished for newly-augmented copies of Mark to enjoy a lasting reception among future generations of Christians, he must have believed that he possessed the authority to interpret the NT Gospels in light of one another and, at least in the case of Mark 16:8, to modify an account that was perceived to be deficient.⁶¹

His descriptions, based loosely on NT accounts of miracles, do not reflect a biblical balance. Whether or not he had personally witnessed miracles is unknown. It is possible that he had if he were old enough to have observed apostolic miracles or to have witnessed early believers who may have been granted such ministry (1 Cor 12:7–11, 27–31). Perhaps his non-canonical appendix to Mark was only the desire of an early “charismatic”—perhaps even one longing for what he heard of “the old days” when (in his mind) all Christians performed miracles. He may have desired to re-ignite the age of miracles by portraying it as normative. From what is said, it is not possible to declare that he either performed or observed miracles in his 2d C. setting.⁶² We should frame our view of miracles from the canonical NT, not from the writings of a 2nd C. charismatic.

Appendix

Did the Four Gospels Circulate as a Single Collection by AD 120?

[This appendix is essentially a continuation of f.n. 8, moved to an appendix due to its length.]

The rationale for AD 120 is that the fourth Gospel was written shortly before the end of the first century and that it would take some time for all four to become known and begin circulating *as a collection*. Kelhoffer’s suggestion is that this happened around AD 110–20.⁶³ We do not have documentary evidence of such a collection this early, so the date must remain somewhat tentative.

In support of Kelhoffer’s thesis, I would note that there are explicit references to all four Gospels in Irenaeus by AD 180.⁶⁴ Tatian’s *Diatessaron* obviously assumes a knowledge of all four Gospels (ca. AD 170?). Justin Martyr (ca. AD 160?) also refers to “the Gospels”

⁶¹ Ibid., 479–80.

⁶² Kelhoffer observes that “one can only wonder how the statements of Mark 16:17–20 concerning the miraculous were, historically speaking, tenable in the first half of the second century” (ibid., 260).

⁶³ Ibid., 158, esp. n. 4

⁶⁴ Somewhat paraphrastic: “The Gospel has four forms but a single spirit,” (translation by D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* [CUP, 2008], 312); ἔδωκεν ἡμῖν τετράμορφον τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον, ἐνὶ δὲ πνεύματι συνεχόμενον (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.8).

(plural), though it is not possible to tell to which specific Gospels he refers; it could refer to all four, but that cannot be proven.⁶⁵ Even earlier Papias (ca. AD 110) reflects knowledge of both Matthew and Mark.⁶⁶

Another clue in this regard is the traditional titles of the Gospels; the use of κατά is explicitly intended to distinguish one such account from another. The earliest extant example of these titles is \mathfrak{P}^{75} , which distinguishes Luke from John as κατά Λουκᾶ versus κατά Ἰωάννην.⁶⁷

The earliest extant manuscript that includes all four Gospels is \mathfrak{P}^{45} , dating to the third century (usually dated around AD 250), though there are other papyri MSS which include various combinations of two or three of the Gospels.⁶⁸ It appears that Matthew and John were the most commonly used followed by Luke/Acts; Mark's Gospel, despite being the most likely Gospel to have been first written, was the least frequently copied and used—if the extant MS evidence is a guide, though it is confirmed by patristic citation frequency as well.⁶⁹ Although it is no longer complete (in its current form only Luke and John remain), it is possible that \mathfrak{P}^{75} once contained all four Gospels. If so, this could push our documentary evidence even earlier (\mathfrak{P}^{75} is probably to be dated in the AD 175–225 range).⁷⁰

It is also possible that three separately numbered papyri were originally part of a single manuscript. T. C. Skeat argued that \mathfrak{P}^4 , \mathfrak{P}^{64} , and \mathfrak{P}^{67} belong together,⁷¹ though this is debated by text critics. Kurt Aland gives credence to this suggestion, pointing out that although \mathfrak{P}^4 contains only text from Luke, there is a partial leaf (a title page [*ein Titelblatt*]?) or more likely (*was wahrscheinlicher ist*) the remains of a double leaf [*den Rest eines Doppelblattes*]?) that contains the heading ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΟΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΜΑΘΘΑΙΟΝ, indicating that it originally contained Matthew as well, and that is exactly what is found in \mathfrak{P}^{64+67} . Though there are differences in the coloration of the photos of these MSS and some slight differences in size, Aland considers these not to be problematic. (The three pieces are located in different parts of the world [\mathfrak{P}^4 , Paris; \mathfrak{P}^{64} , Oxford; \mathfrak{P}^{67} , Barcelona] and were photographed at different scales and with different lighting.) If this verdict holds, then we have another codex with multiple Gospels (two

⁶⁵ “For the apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels (ἃ καλεῖται Εὐαγγέλια), have thus delivered to us what was enjoined upon them...” (*Apol.* 1.66).

⁶⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.15–16; see Harry Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 102, 285n65, and bibliography there.

⁶⁷ Parker, *Introduction*, 313

⁶⁸ See the list in Larry Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 20n24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

⁷⁰ See the summary and bibliography in Hurtado, *Earliest Christian Artifacts*, 36. That \mathfrak{P}^{75} was originally a four-Gospel codex was first proposed by T. C. Skeat.

⁷¹ See Parker, *Living Text of the Gospels*, 19n11 for summary.

at least, though it could have been originally a 4-Gospel codex; the combination of Matthew–Luke in a codex is otherwise unknown, so it may have been a codex similar to \mathfrak{P}^{45}). The date of this codex would be early 3rd C. (*Anfang 3. Jahrhundert*). If it were a 4-Gospel codex (something that cannot be proved with current evidence), it would have even greater significance (*ein noch größeres Gewicht*).⁷²

The phrases *libri et epistulae pauli* (Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, ca. AD 180) and τὰ βιβλία καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι (2 Clem 14:2, mid-2nd C.?) may also be relevant, suggesting collections of Scripture books that likely includes the Gospels (*libri* and τὰ βιβλία).⁷³

⁷² For the brief summary given here, see Kurt Aland, “*Neue Neutestamentliche Papyri II*,” *NTS* 12 (1966): 193–210 (the summary is based on 193–95).

⁷³ See the discussion in Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 150–51.