

Not Serpents of Skin, but From The Falsehood Of Sin: Uncoiling The Ending of Mark's Gospel

Opening Remarks

From the outset, this article is NOT contending whether or not the ending of Mark 16 should be included. Although, it is in my humble opinion that some of the strange language in the ending of Mark actually affirms the truthfulness of the events inserted into the ending of Mark. There are several striking words in Mark's longer ending (Mark 16:17–18):

"These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them..."

As a first impression, the imagery suggests a miraculous ability to resist snakes and poison. It is nevertheless important to note that serpents and poison consistently function within Jewish, Biblical, and early Christian thought as symbols of false teaching and spiritual corruption, not simply physical danger.

Serpents in Scripture: Symbols of Deception

From the beginning of Genesis through Revelation, the serpent is never merely zoological—it is the archetype of **deceit**. In Genesis 3, the serpent slithers into the Garden not to bite with fangs, but to inject Eve with poisonous doubt about God's word. Later Jewish wisdom literature follows this thread:

- **Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 21:2**: "Flee from sin as from the face of a serpent: for if thou comest too near it, it will bite thee."
- **Psalms 140:3**: "They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of vipers."

This same imagery flows into the New Testament:

- **Matthew 23:33**: Jesus calls the Pharisees a "brood of vipers," not because of biology, but because of **false teaching**.
- **2 Corinthians 11:3**: Paul warns that, just as the serpent deceived Eve, so false teachers corrupt the simplicity of Christ.

- **Revelation 12:9:** John describes Satan as a serpent “And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”

Therefore, when Mark refers to "serpents" and "deadly poison," his Jewish-Christian readers would have recognized the metaphor: heresy slithering into the church among the people with its false doctrine poisoning the entire church (2 Peter 2:1).

The Poison Of Heresy: A Dangerous Drink

The early Church frequently described heretical teaching as venom or poison. Ignatius of Antioch warned the Trallians:

“I therefore, yet not I, but the love of Jesus Christ, entreat you that ye use Christian nourishment only, and abstain from herbage of a different kind; I mean heresy. For those [that are given to this] mix up Jesus Christ with their own poison, speaking things which are unworthy of credit, like those who administer a deadly drug in sweet wine, which he who is ignorant of does greedily take, with a fatal pleasure leading to his own death.” (*Letter to the Trallians* 107 A.D.).

This language reflects the very pattern of Mark 16—poisonous teaching disguised as nourishment. The faithful, however, are promised preservation: “it will not harm them.” The believer, rooted in Christ, can discern and resist corruption.

No early Christian expressed this more vividly than **Tertullian of Carthage (c. 200 AD)**. In his treatise *Scorpiace*, he likens heresy to venomous creatures:

- Heresy “creeps into the church like a scorpion,” injecting spiritual poison.
- The faithful must resist with the antidote of Scripture, wielded like the staff of Moses against the serpents of Egypt.

Tertullian believed that the danger was not from reptiles in the marketplace, but rather from false teachers within the church. Similarly, heresy pierces the souls of believers in a quiet and lethal manner, just as the scorpion stings unseen. As a result, he viewed Christ's promise in Mark not as a test of reckless physical stunts, but as a promise that the faithful will not suffer from the venom of falsehood if armed with the truth. As Paul rightly reminds his audience:

“Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil (i.e. snakes & poisons).” - Ephesians 6:11

Mark's Ending and the beginning of the Early Church

NT writers wrote within a culture steeped in metaphor. The early church never staged snake-handling rituals to “prove” faith. Instead, they testified by enduring persecution, refuting heresy, and preserving sound doctrine.

The apologetic force of Mark 16 is not spectacle—it is survival. The church would face vipers in pulpits, scorpions in councils, and poison in doctrine. Yet Christ promises: **“These things will not harm you.”**

Just as in the first century, serpents and scorpions creep into the church today—not in the form of reptiles, but in the form of **false witnesses, compromised truth, and distorted gospels**. The call of Mark 16 is not to chase miracles, but to guard against lies. In a world full of theological poison, the believer’s protection is not daredevil faith, but **faithful discernment**: Scripture, the Spirit, and the witness of the saints.

“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers [i.e. snakes] among you, who will secretly introduce destructive [i.e. poison] heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.” - 2 Peter 2:1

Closing Remarks

The ending of Mark’s Gospel, far from a literal dare, is a **prophetic warning and promise**:

- Serpents = false teachers.
- Poison = heretical doctrines.
- The promise = Christ’s people, if grounded in truth, will not be overcome.

Tertullian’s scorpions, Ignatius’ poison, Paul’s vipers, and Jesus’ own words unite: the greatest danger to the church is not fangs and venom in the field, but lies and venom in the pulpit.

In Christ, the Church endures—immune not to biology, but to blasphemy.