

**Shayla:** Can you explain Mark 16:15-18 to me?

**Midrash:**

Mark 16:15-18 HCSB *Then He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; 18 they will pick up snakes; if they should drink anything deadly, it will never harm them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will get well."*

First, allow me to make a statement that will not be well received by many. The authenticity of Mark 16:9-20 as canonical scripture is a matter of some debate. Though 99% of the later Greek manuscripts contain them, neither of the two earliest Greek manuscripts, the *Sinaiticus* nor the *Vaticanus*, contain the last twelve verses. Around the time that Constantine asked Eusebius, a church historian who lived around AD 300, for copies of Scriptures to give to the churches of Constantinople, Eusebius opined that "accurate" copies of the gospel ended at verse 8 and did not include them in his canon.<sup>1</sup> Apparently, Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome all agreed.

Second, it is important to note that the early church did not systematically use these verses as impetus for righteous behavior. Mr. George Hensley, after reading this passage in 1910, began handling snakes in church; a practice that since spread throughout the Appalachians. However, when we carefully examine each of the "signs" of a believer and compare them to the rest of the Scriptures, we note a glaring disparity.

Driving out demons was the single most common practice in the early church and is supported elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Speaking in new languages was practiced at Pentecost but was later specifically listed as being the "least" of the gifts<sup>3</sup> and was strictly regulated.<sup>4</sup> However, though Paul had one famous incident with a snake bite, he neither handled the snake on purpose nor made a big deal out of miraculous escape.<sup>5</sup> Also, other than Papias (c.125-150) who mentioned that one Justus Barsabbas once drank poison without suffering any ill effects, I know of neither Scriptural nor patristic writings that encourage autopoisoning as a liturgical habit! On the other hand, prayers for miraculous healing were common, supported widely throughout the Word and even commanded!<sup>6</sup>

If the early church had considered this passage to be authoritative, you would expect to see regular mention of handling snakes and drinking poison. No evidence for this behavior exists. Therefore, we may assume that the earliest members of the church, those who actually knew the apostles first hand, did not consider this passage authoritative and draw our own conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> "Quaest ad Marinum"

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 6:11-13

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28, 31; 13:1, 13; 14:1-5

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 14

<sup>5</sup> Acts 28:3-6

<sup>6</sup> James 5:16