

Here is something to break up a bit my thread on the Gospel of Mark, studied from a literary-historical perspective (to be resumed in my next post). This current post is related to Mark but it's well, different.

There was a recent CNN report that some of you may have seen. I include it here, below, with the link to the site at the bottom. This practice in some southern circles (especially in the Appalachians) of handling deadly snakes as part of a worship service is based on the saying of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, after his resurrection, where he tells his disciples that those who come to believe in him will be able to speak in foreign tongues (as happens in Pentecostal churches, e.g.), that they will be able to handle deadly snakes, and if they drink any poison, it will not harm them.

Offhand, I don't know what in addition to snake-handling churches, we don't have poison-drinking churches. Maybe we do? I'm sure someone on the blog can tell me. In any event, there are snake-handling churches, as this article makes abundantly clear. And as it makes equally clear, this practice is really a very bad idea.

What is most striking to me as a scholar of the NT is that the passage in which Jesus' words about handling snakes are contained was not originally part of the Gospel of Mark. Or of any other book of the NT. The oldest form of the Gospel of Mark that we can reconstruct ended with 16:8. Jesus has been dead and buried, on the third day some women go to the tomb, Jesus is not there, a young man who *is* there tells them that he has been raised and that they are to tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, and then - the climax of the scene, and arguably of the Gospel - the women "fled from the tomb and didn't say anything to anyone, for they were afraid." Period. That's it. That's where the Gospel ends.

Scribes who were copying this Gospel were taken aback. How could it end there?!? The *other* Gospels tell of Jesus appearing to the disciples after the resurrection. Doesn't Mark? Surely it does! Scribes dealt with this problem by *adding* an ending - the final 12 verses in the King James Bible that in most modern translations are in brackets, with a note indicating that they probably weren't original. "Probably" isn't strong enough. They almost *certainly* were not original, as almost every textual scholar on the planet agrees (They are missing in our two oldest and best manuscripts; they contain numerous words not found elsewhere in Mark's Gospel; the writing style is different; and there is an impossibly rough grammatical transition between vv. 8 and 9).

I've always thought that someone in the ambulance on the way to the hospital ought to tell one of those snake handlers, "You know, that verse wasn't originally in the Bible."

Anyway, here's the CNN story.

A Kentucky pastor who starred in a reality show about snake-handling in church has died — of a snakebite.

Jamie Coats died Saturday evening after refusing to be treated, Middleborough police said.

On "Snake Salvation," the ardent Pentecostal believer said that he believed that a passage in the Bible suggests poisonous snakebites will not harm believers as long as they are anointed by God. The practice is illegal in most states, but still goes on, primarily in the

rural South.

Coots was a third-generation “serpent handler” and aspired to one day pass the practice and his church, Full Gospel Tabernacle in Jesus Name, on to his adult son, Little Cody.

The National Geographic show featured Coots and cast handling all kinds of poisonous snakes — copperheads, rattlers, cottonmouths. [The channel’s website](#) shows a picture of Coots, goateed, wearing a fedora. “Even after losing half of his finger to a snake bite and seeing others die from bites during services,” Coots “still believes he must take up serpents and follow the Holiness faith,” the website says.

On Sunday, National Geographic Channels spokeswoman Stephanie Montgomery sent CNN this statement: “In following Pastor Coots for our series Snake Salvation, we were constantly struck by his devout religious convictions despite the health and legal peril he often faced.

“Those risks were always worth it to him and his congregants as a means to demonstrate their unwavering faith. We were honored to be allowed such unique access to Pastor Jamie and his congregation during the course of our show, and give context to his method of worship. Our thoughts are with his family at this difficult time.”

In February 2013, Coots was given one year of probation for crossing into Tennessee with venomous snakes. He was previously arrested in 2008 for keeping 74 snakes in his home, according to [National Geographic](#). Tennessee banned snake handling in 1947 after five people were bitten in churches over two years’ time, the channel says on the show site.

On [one episode](#), Coots, who collected snakes, is shown trying to wrest a Western diamondback out of its nook under a rock deep in East Texas. He’s wearing a cowboy hat and a T-shirt that says “The answer to Y2K - JESUS.”

The pastor is helped by his son and a couple of church members.

“He’ll give up, just sooner or later,” one of the members says. “Just be careful. Ease him out.”

The group bags two snakes, which a disappointed Coots says hardly justifies the trip to Texas.

“Catching two snakes the first day, ‘course we’d hoped for more,” Coots says in the video. “We knew that the next day we was gonna have to try to hunt harder and hope for more snakes.”

http://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/16/us/snake-salvation-pastor-bite/index.html?hpt=hp_t3



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