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# Why ‘Reception History’ Is Not Just Another Exegetical Method: The Case Of Mark’s Ending

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## Abstract

The history of reception is suffering from a fundamental misunderstanding. Since the publication of *Truth and Method*, everyone has had the impression that reception history is just another exegetical technique. However, the heart of Gadamer’s argument is not the history of the effects of the text, but the historicity of understanding: a text is seized only within the limits of the historical situation of its interpreter. To demonstrate this point, this paper takes the example of the Markan ending. Surprisingly, a 16th-century Thomistic theologian, Cajetan, and a contemporary commentary are so close that one might think they are defending the same view of the text. Both intend to maintain the canonicity of verses 9–20, but both point out that it may be adventurous to build any doctrine or practice on these verses alone. But the context is different, obviously. The first one tries to justify a conception of faith that does not depend directly on miracles; the second one affirms a hermeneutic centred on the interpreter’s response, being wary of its ecclesiological drifts. This confirms that theological considerations rather than philological ones have prevailed in challenging Mark’s ending.

**Keywords:** *Wirkungsgeschichte*; History of Reception; Mark’s Ending; Cajetan; history of New Testament Interpretation

## 1 Introduction

Reception history suffers from a fundamental misunderstanding. Since the publication of *Truth and Method*,<sup>1</sup> everyone has the impression that it is just another exegetical technique. Textbooks as different as Strecker and Schnelle’s, Barton’s, or Tate’s present it as a kind of tool to be used at the end of a text study, once the work of textual, rhetorical, historical, and narrative analysis has been completed.<sup>2</sup> And influential commentaries from the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, as well as certain volumes of Blackwell’s *Through the Centuries* series give just this impression: after dissecting the text according to various exegetical protocols, they list the successive

<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; Continuum Impacts; London/New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Georg Strecker and Udo Schnelle, *Einführung in die neutestamentliche Exegese*, 3rd ed. (UTB 1253; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1989); Stephen Prickett, ‘The Bible in Literature and Art’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton; Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 160–80; W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 3rd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008).

interpretations given to it. However, the core of Gadamer's argument is not the history of the effects of the text, which is only a secondary consequence, but the historicity of understanding. Borrowing this concept of historicity (*Historizität, Geschichtlichkeit*) from Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, Gadamer demonstrates that the process of interpretation can only take place in a particular temporal and historical context. In other words, a text is only understood within the limits of the historical situation of its interpreter. Studying the history of reception is thus neither a pleasant optional excursion for erudite and slightly nerdy connoisseurs, nor a method called 'reception history', but *the very condition of understanding*. This historicity of understanding is best illustrated by examples.<sup>3</sup> The recent SNSF MARK16 online conference organised by Claire Clivaz has renewed the approach to Mark's ending.<sup>4</sup> It has given me the opportunity to develop an interesting practical case. As I was reviewing the history of the comments on this ending, I came across two amazing quotes:

The first one states:

Some textual critics, even some conservative scholars, have serious doubts as to whether these verses belong to the gospel of Mark. They point out that Mark 16.9–20 is absent from important early manuscripts and displays certain peculiarities of vocabulary, style, and theological content that are unlike the rest of Mark [...].

How is one to regard verses 9–20? Integral to the gospel or not, they represent old tradition—historically reliable—and ought to be considered carefully in any study of Mark. The material offers insight into early understandings of Jesus and the apostolic mission. It ought to be used with reserve, however, in teaching and preaching. No doctrine or practice should be based exclusively on Mark 16:9–20.<sup>5</sup>

The second one concludes:

Therefore, I would add to that that we understand how much this passage<sup>6</sup> must be considered with nuance. And, indeed, there are some points in this passage that are not found in any other gospel. However, I do not see anything manifestly adverse to the other gospels. [...] Personally, I consider this passage, which is present in many Greeks, to be suspect because of the addition of I do not know which of these terms that Jerome reports in the *Dialogue [against the Pelagians]* and even because of the promise that follows: *And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils*, etc. Whatever the truth, the suspicion towards these verses is demonstrated because these words do not have the sound authority to strengthen the faith as the rest of Mark's unquestionable writings do.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Régis Burnet, *Exegesis and History of Reception: Reading the New Testament Today with the Readers of the Past* (WUNT 455; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> The proceedings of the June 2022 SNSF MARK16 online conference, organized by Claire Clivaz (DH+, SIB, Lausanne) with Mina Monier (Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo) and Dan Batovici (UCLouvain, KULeuven) are in publication in the COMSt Bulletin.

<sup>5</sup> *Zondervan King James Version Commentary* (ed. Edward E. Hindson and Dan Mitchell; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) 154–55.

<sup>6</sup> We translate *capitulum* according to the old meaning of the word (passage, pericope), since Cajetan doesn't express any doubt about the beginning of chapter 16. Pierre Petitmengin, 'Capitula païens et chrétiens', in *Titres et articulation du texte dans les ouvrages antiques* (ed. J.-C. Fredouille, Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, Philippe Hoffmann, and Pierre Petitmengin; Paris: Institut d'Études augustiniennes, 1997) 491–507.

<sup>7</sup> *Quae ideo attulerim, ut intellegamus quam varie habeatur capitulum hoc. Et revera nonnulla sunt in hoc capitulo, quae in nullo alio Evangelista habentur: nihil tamen ego video contrarium manifeste alii Evangelistis. [...] Crediderim ego*

How is it possible that the same rationale and the same conclusion can be found in a commentary issued by a Protestant—and even evangelical—publishing house, Zondervan, and in a book printed 500 years earlier, whose author was Thomas de Vio (1469–1564), the notorious Cardinal Cajetan, who was famous for having called Martin Luther to appear before him in Augsburg in 1518? Either we conclude, with some degree of frustration, that 500 years of patient exegetical labour have led to nothing new (and that it was not worth getting into so many religious conflicts); or we must admit that the essential point is not the philological result, but rather what we do with it. The only way to understand it is to consider the situation of the interpreter. In other words, the same words are used and the same historical fact is put forward, but a different thing is said.

## 2 The Same Result?

First, let us analyse what is being argued. The same historical fact is taken into consideration – the absence of Mark’s ending in some good manuscripts – from which the same consequence is drawn – a suspicion about the content of the said ending.

### 2.1 The Same Doubts about the Long Ending

Both commentaries manifest the same doubts about the long ending. The only difference between the two statements is that Cajetan refers to Jerome’s testimony, while the Zondervan commentators favour reference to the manuscripts. The discrepancy is largely explained by the knowledge that each century has of witnesses to the shorter ending.

At the time of Cajetan, only the *Regius* (L<sup>6</sup>) preserved in the Royal Library in Paris was known. As for the patristic sources, Cajetan indicates, shortly before the quotation, the doubts expressed by Jerome in the *Epistle to Hedibia* (*Ep 120 ad Hedibiam* 3) and in the *Dialogue against the Pelagians* (II, 15).<sup>8</sup> He does not mention a text known in the West since the Council of Florence, that of a twelfth-century Byzantine monk, Euthymius Zigabene, but one has the impression that he paraphrases it: ‘Some interpreters say that the Gospel of Mark ends here and that what follows is a later addition. However, it must also be explained because it contains nothing against the truth.’<sup>9</sup>

Modern commentaries, by contrast, are familiar with the alternative readings to the long ending provided by the *Sinaiticus* (Ⲙ) discovered in the 1850s and edited in 1863, as well as the *Sinaiticus syriacus* identified by Agnes Smith Lewis in 1892. They can also refer to the codex minuscule 304, which appears in the seventeenth century in the collection of Charles de Montchal (archbishop of Toulouse 1628–1651), the *Washingtonensis*, acquired by Charles Lang Freer in 1906, and the Armenian manuscript of Etchmiadzin known since the end of the nineteenth century. Finally, they can corroborate Jerome’s assertions on the short ending with the Codex of Bobbio (*Boggiensis*), published by Tischendorf in the *Jahrbücher der Literatur* (1847–1849).

*suspectum apud multos Graecos habitum hoc capitulum propter admixtionem a nescio quibus illorum verborum quae Hieronymus retulit in Dialogo: & etiam propter promissionem subjunctam. Signa autem eos qui crediderint hac sequuntur: in nomine meo daemonia eijicient, &c. Quicquid autem sit de veritate, suspicionum tamen istarum effectus est, quod haec scripta non sunt solidae autoritatis ad firmandam fidem sicut sunt reliqua Marci indubitata.* Thomas de Vio (Cajetan), *Evangelia cum Commen. Caietani* (Florentini (Firenze): in aedibus Luceantonii Iunctæ, 1530), 83 v.

<sup>8</sup> Text and discussion in William Reuben Farmer, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark* (SNTSMS 25; London: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 22–24.

<sup>9</sup> Φασί δέ τινες τῶν ἐξηγητῶν ἐνταῦθα συμπληροῦσθαι τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγέλιον· τὰ δὲ ἐφεξῆς προσθήκην εἶναι μεταγενεστέραν. Χρῆ δὲ καὶ ταύτην ἐρμηνεύσαι, μηδὲν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ λυμαιομένην. EUTHYMIUS ZIGABENUS, *Commentarius in Quatuor Evangelia*, In Marcum 16, PG 129,845.

As for the content, although separated by 500 years, the two commentaries more or less voice the same doubts. They both give the same impression of being confronted with a sort of patchwork of disparate elements (an ‘epitome’ according to Lohmeyer’s expression).<sup>10</sup> Contemporary exegetes such as Camille Focant have identified all the similarities and borrowings from the various pre-existing gospel accounts.<sup>11</sup>

In particular, one passage raises suspicions: verses 17–18, which Cajetan incriminates directly in the previous quotation, and to which Zondervan’s commentators devote a long paragraph beginning with ‘a word of caution is in order here’.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>17</sup> σημεῖα δὲ τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ταῦτα παρακολουθήσει· ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου δαιμόνια ἐκβαλοῦσιν, γλώσσαις λαλήσουσιν καιναῖς,<sup>18</sup> [καὶ ἐν ταῖς χερσίν] ὄφεις ἀροῦσιν κἄν θανάσιμόν τι πῖωσιν οὐ μὴ αὐτοὺς βλάψῃ, ἐπὶ ἀρρώστους χεῖρας ἐπιθήσουσιν καὶ καλῶς ἔξουσιν.<sup>17</sup> And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; <sup>18</sup> they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. (Mark 16.17–18, NRSV.)

We can understand their surprise. As Joseph Hug has shown, while the exorcism in the name of Jesus, the glossolalia, and the healing of the sick have counterparts in the Gospels or in Paul, while the taking of snakes with the full hand comes perhaps from Luke 10.19 and from Paul’s Maltese viper (Acts 28.2–6), the harmless poison is without parallel.<sup>13</sup> There is hardly any connection with the anecdote of the poison drunk by Justus Barsabbas recounted by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Hist. Eccl.* III, 39, 9) or with the appearance of John before Nero narrated by the *Acts of John in Rome* 9–10, during which the apostle made a deadly poison innocuous by his prayers.<sup>14</sup> The late dating of these testimonies (and of a few others that he cites) has led James Kelhoffer to assign this final date to the second century.<sup>15</sup>

Besides, both Cajetan and contemporary commentators question another verse, verse 14, which rebukes the disciples for their unbelief (ἀπιστία) and hardening of the heart (σκληροκαρδία). Cajetan invokes John’s gospel at this point, voicing surprise that the reprimands are directed at all the apostles, even though they are expressed explicitly only to Thomas and that John has already been exempted from them (since he had come to faith by looking at the linen cloths); Zondervan’s commentary emphasises the narrator’s extreme generalisation of the disciples’ unbelief here.<sup>16</sup> The recent work on the ending by Kara Lyons-Pardue confirms this analysis. She shows that the writer does not simply compile the gospel sources to provide a satisfactory ending by trying to align it with what the first writer had written, but seeks to define what the right attitude for discipleship might be. For her, the long ending proceeds to a surprising condemnation of the Eleven and an equally unexpected exaltation of Mary of Magdala as a model of faithful discipleship.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus* (KEK, 1.2.11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951) 361.

<sup>11</sup> Camille Focant, *L’Évangile selon Marc*, Commentaire biblique: Nouveau Testament 2 (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 606–9.

<sup>12</sup> Hindson and Mitchell, *Zondervan King James*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Hug, *La Finale de l’Évangile de Marc: Mc 16, 9-20*, Études bibliques (Paris: Gabalda, 1978), 102–28.

<sup>14</sup> Hug, *La Finale*, 120. The two references are already quoted by Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Marc*, 5th ed., EBib (Paris: Gabalda, 1929) 453.

<sup>15</sup> James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark* (WUNT, 2.112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 432–67.

<sup>16</sup> de Vio (Cajetan), *Evangelia cum Commen. Caietani*, 83 r–84 v; Hindson and Mitchell, *Zondervan King James*, 155.

<sup>17</sup> Kara Lyons-Pardue, *Gospel Women and the Long Ending of Mark*, Library of New Testament Studies 614 (New York: T&T Clark, 2020) 144.

## 2.2 Different Challenges

Cajetan and his distant successors of the twenty-first century thus concur in bringing to light the same facts concerning Mark's ending. This provides us with a first and valuable lesson. Not all good exegesis begins with Reimarus and Lessing; even if the *Aufklärung* wanted to give the illusion that it was carrying out a sort of *tabula rasa* of all previous convictions, the exegesis that followed did not cease to recycle—sometimes without sourcing them—opinions from the preceding centuries.<sup>18</sup>

Does this mean that the two comments are saying exactly the same thing? A closer look shows that this is not the case.

Cajetan's concern with snakes and poison is primarily theological. The cardinal questions the link that the text establishes between faith and signs, that is, miracles:

This formula about signs seems very suspicious. In fact, according to evangelical tenet, these signs do not come from faith, but from the excellence of faith, from the charisms [*donorum*] of faith, as it is written in several places in the gospels. On the contrary, this text indicates that these signs are the consequence of faith sufficient for salvation.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of miracles, with which Cajetan was very familiar as the most admired Thomistic theologian of his time, is reflected in this passage. For Aquinas, miracles cannot flow systematically from salvific faith. As question 178 of the *Pars Secunda-Secundæ* of the *Summa Theologica* states, they are wrought by God in order to confirm the professed truth or to demonstrate the holiness of a particular individual whom God wishes to set as an example (*ST II<sup>a-2æ</sup>*, q. 178, a. 2, rep). The miracle cannot be the result of a habitus granted to a holy person, but rather of a unique will of God (*ST II<sup>a-2æ</sup>*, q. 178, a. 1, rep). As Benoît Bourguine summarises, the miracle plays only a secondary role in relation to sufficient faith: 'Miracles undeniably play a role in access to faith, but this role is secondary to the interior motion coming from God by which God raises the believer above his or her nature.'<sup>20</sup>

For twenty-first century commentators, the concern is quite different. It pertains to the practical consequences that the reader could draw from these few words.

A word of caution is in order here. One is ill-advised to base a practice on this text. Any doctrine or practice derived from this section of Scripture ought to have a basis in passages of the New Testament whose genuineness is certain. Furthermore, simply because a practice is mentioned in Scripture does not mean that it is normative for every believer. Because a biblical passage is descriptive does not mean that it is prescriptive. Hence, unless the author clearly indicated that he intended to establish a phenomenon as a precedent, the reader must not conclude that its presence is equivalent to a command for him or her. This text does not require the reader to consider anything in it as prescriptive rather than merely descriptive.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Burnet, *Exegesis and History of Reception*, 25–37.

<sup>19</sup> *Suspecta apparet haec clausula signorum : eo quod secundum Evangelicam doctrinam signa haec non sunt fidei, sed magnitudinis fidei, sed donorum fidei, ut patet in pluribus locis Evangelii : textus autem iste significat signa haec consequi fidem sufficientem ad salutem.* de Vio [Cajetan], *Evangelia cum Commen. Caietani*, 84 v.

<sup>20</sup> Benoît Bourguine, 'Le miracle dans la théologie fondamentale classique', *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 98 (2010) 515. See also François Pouliot, *La Doctrine du miracle chez Thomas d'Aquin: 'Deus in omnibus intime operatur'*, Bibliothèque thomiste 56 (Paris: Vrin, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Hindson and Mitchell, *Zondervan King James*, 156.

The explanation, which is repetitive and somewhat circuitous, seeks to avoid a reading which tends to apply the text in a normative manner, transforming it into a community prescription or a personal life rule.

Is it a question of dogmatic theology or of practical theology? Behind the philological position on the status of Mark's ending, a vision that goes far beyond the simple desire to understand the text emerges. This perspective can be properly understood only within the historical context of the writing of each commentary. Without taking into account the historicity of the understanding, it is possible to grasp what is said, but not *why* it is said, and therefore what its *meaning* is.

### 3 Cajetan: The Ending of Mark and Dogmatics

The distinctive feature of Cajetan's historical situation is that he is a precursor. By combining Thomistic reflections on the supernatural with the new philological tools available to a scholar of the early sixteenth century, he was able to question the canonicity of Mark's ending. But his position would not be accepted, for dogmatic and political reasons, for at least three hundred years.

#### 3.1 An Isolated Position...

As Michael O'Connor pointed out, biblical commentary was above all an instrument of reform for Cajetan. The Dominican judged, like many in the early sixteenth century, that the Church was in decline and he wished to restore a certain evangelical purity.<sup>22</sup> He, therefore, employs critical tools (the study of Greek, the consultation of manuscripts, the reading of the Church Fathers) to cast doubt on passages whose authority he deems suspect, notably some psalms, the book of Job, the epistles of James, Jude, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and, here, the ending of Mark.<sup>23</sup>

Jerome's testimony helps him to push these verses into a kind of second circle of canonicity. For him, they stand in absolute contradiction to his conception of faith, and likewise, to the role of the supernatural, since the consequence of keeping this promise would be that a defect would reach those who have faith, or that an impediment would arise, to explain that faith is not devoid of miracles, but that it is human beings who are devoid of faith regarding the efficacy of miracles.<sup>24</sup> It is quite easy to reconstruct his logic: since miracles do not happen every day, either we must hold that faith from God is imperfect, or this passage must be rejected. To speak like a modern, Mark's ending is dismissed for the sake of a certain conception of rationality.

This view is quite isolated in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the Polyglot of Alcalá, the *Novum Instrumentum Omne*, and the Polyglot of Antwerp present the text of Mark 16.9–20 without any reluctance. If reservations are to be found, they must be sought in the annotations. In the notes of the *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus recalls Jerome's prejudices and concludes: 'Moreover, since this last chapter of Mark is found today in all the Greek copies I have consulted, this conclusion [*coronis*] appears to be inserted from some apocryphal Gospel to the least daring reader.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Michael O'Connor, *Cajetan's Biblical Commentaries: Motive and Method*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 63–91.

<sup>23</sup> O'Connor, 148–64.

<sup>24</sup> *Cum cuius veritate promissionis stat, quod ex parte habentis fidem defectus accidat, seu impedimentum praestatur ita quod fides ipsa non deest signis, sed homini deest fidei ad efficaciam signorum.* de Vio (Cajetan), *Evangelia cum Commen. Caietani*, 84 v°.

<sup>25</sup> *Caeterum ut extremum illud caput habeatur hodie in omnibus quae sane viderim, graecis exemplaribus, ita coronidem hanc ex Apocrypho quopiam evangelio, ascriptam apparet a lectore studioso.* Erasmus, *Novum Instrumentum Omne* (Apud

Κορῶνις is the label Erasmus chose to indicate the tail end of Mk 16.<sup>26</sup> Out of confidence in Jerome, he indicates almost in passing that the ending may be problematic, but goes no further. Erasmus shows himself to be true to the approach that Reventlow sees as characteristic of him: while his editing of the Bible may appear to be innovative, his use of the sacred text is quite conservative and even fairly pious.<sup>27</sup>

To put it plainly, until the nineteenth century, both Catholics and Protestants had a vested interest in saving this ending of Mark, for reasons that were not strictly philological. Such a respected commentator as the Jesuit, Juan Maldonado (Maldonatus, 1533–1583), who was Michel de Montaigne's friend,<sup>28</sup> indicates the Catholic answer: not only is there nothing controversial in this passage, but above all, its authority cannot be questioned, since it was affirmed by the Council of Trent.<sup>29</sup> The authority of the Church overrides any critical findings.

Protestants do the same for another reason. As the compiler of commentaries (Calvin, Bullinger, etc.), Marlorat (1508–1562) testifies the text did not raise any objections in the churches of the Reformation.<sup>30</sup> Benedictus Aretius (1522–1574), a Bernese pastor, explains the reasons why. These verses provide clear instruction on the ministry as he understood it: it should be universal and not restricted to clerics; it should focus on the preaching of the gospel; it should be done by trained ministers; and eventually, it should flourish in a visible way, with signs.<sup>31</sup> Mark 16, in its long ending, corresponds perfectly to his theology; there is no way to get rid of it.

An opponent, Cornelius a Lapide, confirms the Protestant use of verse 16.<sup>32</sup> He invokes successively the case of the Lutherans who derive from it the idea that faith alone saves, without the necessity of works, then the Anabaptists who derive from it the thesis that only adults, in a position to believe, should be baptised and not little children, and finally the Calvinists who affirm that baptism is not required since it is of faith alone that Christ speaks in this passage.

Text-critical issues lead to casting doubt on the legitimacy of the long ending, but theological issues lead to its preservation. The most striking evidence for this is provided by Bengel. Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) is rightly regarded as one of the fathers of

Incllytam Germaniæ Basileam (Basel): (Froben), 1516) 313. See also F. Hovingh, ed. *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami. Ordinis sexti, tomus quintus. Annotationes in Novum Testamentum. Pars Prima* (La Haye: Elsevier Science, 2000) 434

<sup>26</sup> Claire Clivaz and Régis Burnet, 'The Freer-Logion (Mark 16.14): GA 032, Jerome, and Erasmus', TC (forthcoming).

<sup>27</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (vol. 3; Resources for Biblical Study 62; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010) 55–63.

<sup>28</sup> Alain Legros, 'Montaigne et Maldonat', *Montaigne Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum* 13 (2001) 65–98.

<sup>29</sup> 'Since it has seemed to some that there is a contradiction between Mark and Matthew at this point, they see it as a good reason to cast suspicion: this argument is quite absurd. We should apply it in the same way to the last chapter of Luke and the penultimate chapter of John: there are more contradictions between them than between Matthew and Mark. It is therefore not admissible to doubt the authority of this chapter, especially because of the approval of the Council of Trent not only of all the books we now have in the canon, but also of each part of each book.' *Nam quod nonnulli repugnantiam, quae inter Marcum hoc loco et Matthaëum videtur esse, causam putant ejusmodi suspicioni praeuisse, absurda prorsus est ratio. Isto enim modo et ultimum caput Lucae et penultimum Joannis inducere deberemus: major enim inter illos et Matthaëum quam inter Matthaëum et Marcum apparet repugnantia. Dubitare igitur de hujus capituli auctoritate non licet, praesertim Concilio Tridentini non solum libros omnes, quos nunc habemus in canone, sed singulorum etiam librorum singulas partes approbante.* Juan Maldonado (Maldonatus), *Commentarii in Quatuor Evangelistas* (Lugduni (Lyon): Iunta, 1598) 850.

<sup>30</sup> Augustin Marlorat, *Novi Testamenti Catholica Expositio Ecclesiastica*, 2nd ed. (Genevæ: Henricus Stephanus (Henri Estienne), 1574) 304.

<sup>31</sup> Benedictus Aretius, *Commentarii in Quatuor Evangelistas* (Morgiis (Morges): Le Preux, 1580) 39.

<sup>32</sup> Cornelius a Lapide, *Commentarius in Quatuor Evangelia*, vol. 1 (Antverpiæ (Antwerp): Martinus Nutius (Martin Nuyt), 1639) 619.

modern exegesis. In his critical notes (*Apparatus Criticus ad Novum Testamentum*), he mentions the texts already discussed by Erasmus and Theodore Beza, but he also quotes the newly edited writings of the Fathers.<sup>33</sup> However, in his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, he glosses over all the verses of Chapter 16 without raising an eyebrow.<sup>34</sup> Why did he not draw conclusions from his critical work? The reason is simple, and it is given in his commentary on verse 17: 'In Leonberg, a town in Württemberg, according to the Fathers' memories, a young girl was so crippled in her limbs that she could barely drag herself up a few steps with the aid of crutches; but while the dean was speaking from the pulpit about the wondrous power of the name of Jesus, she was suddenly straightened up.'<sup>35</sup>

Bengel is above all a pietist for whom signs count in the building of the Church and in the life of faith; the performative power of Dean Raumayer's preaching healing the young Katharina Hummel in 1644 is one of them.<sup>36</sup> Verse 17, proclaiming the existence of miracles, could not be apocryphal in his eyes, because it justified the practices of his own community.

### 3.2 ... Adopted Only in the Nineteenth Century

It was not until the nineteenth century that a new vision could be expressed. This was the outcome of an unprecedented sociological context: the German university. The latter had distinguished itself in the editing of the classical texts of antiquity and intended to adopt the same method for the texts of the New Testament, by comparing manuscripts; more importantly, the university was taking on its autonomy vis-à-vis the ecclesiastical structures and was able to scrutinise biblical exegesis issues with all the more freedom, as Michael Legaspi has convincingly shown.<sup>37</sup>

Coming after the editions of Michaelis and Wettstein, Eichhorn, who taught at Göttingen, remarked that the sole examination of the manuscripts does not allow a definitive conclusion on the adventitious character of the ending. However, the sum of the questions it begs permits doubts: 'Criticism can in no way challenge the authenticity of this passage, and the objection must either be raised by historical combinations or excused by the low authority which Mark, as an apostolic assistant, enjoys, if he cannot be united with Matthew.'<sup>38</sup> Eichhorn returns to Cajetan's hypothesis of secondary canonicity, repeating like him an old patristic tradition. In this case, he refers to the allegation of Clement of Alexandria (quoted by Eusebius in *Hist. eccl.* VI,14,5–7) that Mark was the disciple of Peter. His authority would therefore be less than that of Matthew, who was one of the Twelve.

If Eichhorn remains cautious, Johannes Schulthess (1763–1836), professor of theology in Zürich, is much more affirmative. His article exerted a constant influence on later scholars since it is quoted in the commentaries of Kühnholl (1833), Meyer (1834), Bleek (1862), etc.

<sup>33</sup> J. A. Bengel, *Apparatus Criticus ad Novum Testamentum* (ed. P. D. Burk; Tubingæ (Tübingen): Cotta, 1763) 170–1.

<sup>34</sup> Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, 2nd ed. (Tubingæ (Tübingen): Schramm, 1759) 217–18.

<sup>35</sup> *Leonbergæ, oppido Wirtenbergico, patrum memoria, mulier ita membris capta, ut fulcris vix spithamæis reperet, dum Decanus pro suggestu miraculosam vim nominis Iesu tractaret, repente erecta est.* Bengel, 218.

<sup>36</sup> Renate Dürr, 'Prophetie und Wunderglauben - Zu den kulturellen Folgen der Reformation', *Historische Zeitschrift* 281 (2005) 3–32.

<sup>37</sup> *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, OHST (ed. Michael C. Legaspi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> 'Die Kritik kann auf keine Weise die Ächtheit dieser Stelle anfechten, und der Widerspruch muß entweder durch historische Combinationen gehoben, oder mit der geringen Autorität entschuldigt werden, welche Markus, als apostolischer Gehülfe, hat, wenn er sich mit Matthäus nicht vereinigen läßt.' Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das neue Testament*, 2nd ed. (vol. 1; Leipzig: Weidmann, 1820) 623.



The author of the text in question seems to attach more importance to the miracles, the casting out of demons in comparison to the evangelists and apostles, because he mentions this circumstance without a reason or a relation to the story. Thus, v. 17,18, the signs that follow those who have paid homage to the Lord are nothing but supernatural things and strange manifestations of miraculous power, some of which are without example in the NT, since in Matthew Jesus promises his disciples nothing more than that he will be with them, in Luke that he will draw them with power from heaven, in John that the Father will send them the Holy Spirit who will guide them into the truth, without trivialities of this kind.<sup>39</sup>

Like Cajetan, who was uncomfortable with the same verse, nineteenth-century Germanic scholars do not feel attuned to the signs promised by Christ to his disciples. To declare this pericope adulterated better suits their vision of a Church very far removed from the charismatic phenomena, accused of being *Kleinlichkeiten*, trivialities.

Only one example expresses that the peculiar historical situation of the German university is the reason for such a claim: that of Meyer. In his famous commentary, once again on this question of the snake, he asserts with aplomb that this σημεῖον is far too misleading not to betray its character as an apocryphal legend<sup>40</sup>, and he makes the connection with the snake magic (*Schlangenzauberei*) of the Orientals. However, what is appropriate in the German context is not at all suitable in the American context, as the translation of Meyer's book in the United States attests. Indeed, after the German scholar's text, the editor, Matthew Riddle, felt compelled to write a rather embarrassed 'Note by the American Editor'.<sup>41</sup> He starts by criticising Meyer himself, acknowledging that he is quite isolated in his opinion. Then he shelters behind the authority of Westcott and Hort to cite the evidence that would justify the rejection of the final. And ultimately, he points out that many English and American scholars persist in viewing it as authentic.

More than a century later and nearly 500 years after Cajetan, the same position is still defended in Eduard Schweizer's commentary. While he does not develop his own opinion of the text explicitly, several expressions clearly betray it, especially when he comes to the signs in verses 17–18: 'The enumeration of the signs promised to all (!) believers reveals a Church in which miracles still happen and are important.'<sup>42</sup> The exclamation mark and the *noch immer* (still) indicate an obvious distancing from phenomena depicted

<sup>39</sup> 'Dem Wunderthum, dem Austreiben der Dämonen und vergleichen scheint der Verfasser des fraglichen Textes einen größeren Werth bezumessen, als die Evangelisten und Apostel, weil er diesen Umstand erwähnt, ohne daß ein Zweck oder eine Beziehung auf die Geschichte wahrzunehmen ist. So sind v. 17,18 die Zeichen, welche denjenigen, die dem Herrn gehuldt haben, nachfolgen, lauter übernatürliche Dinge, und sonderbare Äußerungen der Wunderkraft, die zum Theil im N.T. ohne Beyspiel sind, da Jesus bey Matthäus seinen Jünger nichts anders verheißt, als er werde bey ihnen seyn, bey Lucas, er werde sie anziehen mit Kraft aus der Höhe, bey Johannes, der Vater werde ihnen den heiligen Geist senden, der sie in alle Wahrheit leite, ohne alle solche Kleinlichkeiten.' Johannes Schultheß, 'Die Frage über die Ächtheit der Stelle des Evangelium nach Markus 16,9–20. Durch vollständige Darstellung und scharfe Prüfung aller innen und äußern Zeugnisse und Beweise dafür und dawider endlich erörtert und ausgemacht', in *Analekten für das Studium der exegetischen und systematischen Theologie* (vol. 3.3; ed. Carl August Gottlieb Keil and Heinrich Gottlieb Tzschirner; Leipzig: Barth, 1817) 119.

<sup>40</sup> 'Es wäre auch für ein σημεῖον der Gläubigen zu gaukelhaft, und verräth ganz den Charakter der apokryphischen Legende.' Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über die Evangelien des Markus und Lukas*, 2nd ed. (KEK, 1.2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1846) 179.

<sup>41</sup> Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Gospels of Mark and Luke* (ed. Matthew Riddle; trans. Robert Ernest Wallis; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884) 198–200.

<sup>42</sup> "Die Aufzählung der Zeichen, die allen (!) Glaubenden verheißen sind, verrät eine Gemeinde, in der noch immer Wunder geschehen und wichtig sind." Eduard Schweizer, *Das Evangelium nach Markus*, NTD, 4.18 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 209.

as the remnant of a primitive time portrayed as full of *Mirakulöse* or *Enthusiasmus*.<sup>43</sup> The argument is easy to reconstruct: these irrational beliefs have run their course and denote an era of backwardness that is now over.

Schweizer's example allows us to clarify what is meant by the historicity of understanding. It describes the unique and unsubstitutable condition of the interpreter engaged in his or her time and in his or her social position in relation to the text. The Catholic Cajetan questions Mark's ending on behalf of his Thomistic theology and his relation to the patristic tradition, while the Protestant of the late twentieth century, Eduard Schweizer (1913–2006), distances himself from it on behalf of a reconstruction of the context. But at the same time, historical situations are linked by a tradition of interpretation, a history of readings, which can lead two commentators to share the same position, because they are under the influence of the same worldview. And here, very clearly, we see that it is a similar relationship to the supernatural that binds together the cardinal who convinced Luther of heresy and the student of Karl Barth.

#### 4 Mark's Ending and Postmodern Hermeneutics

The historical situation of the exegetes of the Zondervan commentary is quite different. Unlike Cajetan, they are not at the beginning of a process but at the end. The point that bothers them is the issue of the practices in force in their community, of the relationship to the text, in short, of a postmodern hermeneutic.

##### 4.1 From Adulterated Endings to No Ending at All. Or: Towards a Postmodern Hermeneutic

Until the mid-nineteenth century, while exegetes expressed doubts about the Marcan authenticity of the ending, no one went so far as to say that the gospel should stop at verse 8, after ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ. Instead, interpreters offered a spectrum of hypotheses ranging from the loss of a later completed folio to Mark's lack of time to finish his work. The majority felt that a 'normal' ending had been planned, which the vagaries of history failed to preserve. This is still the option defended to this day by Robert Gundry, R. T. France, or Clayton Croy, and very recently Darrell Bock.<sup>44</sup>

Only in the early twentieth century did another reading emerge, which dealt with the idea that the end of Mark could be 16.8. One of the first expressions of this reading can be found in the commentary of Julius Wellhausen, who states emphatically that the Gospel of Mark ends with verse 8. And he adds that those who want it to continue are erring: 'They have not understood 16, 4. Nothing is missing; it would be a pity if something else were to follow.'<sup>45</sup> To capture the meaning of this statement, the exegesis of verse 7 is worth quoting in full:

The stone has been rolled away—yet it was huge. With this everything is said. For the risen one has rolled it off by breaking through the closed door. Mark lets the resurrection be recognised only by this effect being seen; he does not make the slightest attempt to describe vividly the process itself, which no one saw. This is not only modest, but also subtle, and impressive for those who know how to pay attention

<sup>43</sup> Schweizer, *Evangelium nach Markus*, 210.

<sup>44</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) 1010–12; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 2002) 670–74; N. Clayton Croy, *The Mutilation of Mark's Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003); Darrell L. Bock, *Mark*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 385–87.

<sup>45</sup> 'Sie haben 16, 4 nicht verstanden. Es fehlt nichts; es wäre schade, wenn noch etwas hinterher käme.' Julius Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Marci*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Reimer, 1909) 137.

to silence. Nevertheless, it is the first timid attempt to go beyond the appearances of the Risen One in Galilee.<sup>46</sup>

Wellhausen, coming at the end of a long rationalist tradition that rejects supernatural manifestations and confines faith to the inward, sees in Mark's economical use of literary resources a kind of argumentation that is much stronger than the rhetoric of ekphrasis. He celebrates the ellipsis because he belongs to a context that relegates faith to the side of personal experience: the description of the deeds of a resurrected dead body makes him uncomfortable, as does the promise of extraordinary actions. Not addressing the tricky ending of Mark's Gospel suits his theological view perfectly; it allows him to stick to the evidence of the empty tomb.

Some forty years later, Robert Henry Lightfoot followed this line in his 1949 lecture, which repeated much of what Lohmeyer had said.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, after apologising for rehabilitating the fear that was, according to him, an integral part of his grandparents' religion, he advocates for the importance of this fear in order to understand what is at stake: 'The Christian doctrine of eternal life, which is indissolubly connected with that of the Lord's resurrection, is, in the true sense of the word, a tremendous and, on one side, a terrible truth; if we do not know for ourselves that this is so, we are far astray.'<sup>48</sup> The women at the tomb manifest the right attitude, the one that allows them to approach God. In this praise of the fear of women, we recognise the influence of Rudolf Otto and his *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*:<sup>49</sup> the inner feeling of sacred terror is precisely the mark of the irrational numinous irruption within rationality.

This passage to interiority is a sign of the evolution of mentalities that emphasises the personalistic dimension of the relationship to the divine and is part of this great global evolution of the emergence of individualism. In the wake of Rudolf Otto, it is accomplished in a form of neo-Pietism which confines the divine to the inner movements of the soul to let rationality unfold in the external world.<sup>50</sup> It developed successively in two directions, which surfaced at two different times, the 1970s and the 1990s, but which are two sides of the same process.

From the 1970s on, commentators sought to reconstruct the context in which the community could have allowed a gospel to end in such a void. There was no lack of answers: to oppose the enthusiasm of a realised eschatology,<sup>51</sup> resist the theology of glory,<sup>52</sup> or a gnostic perspective,<sup>53</sup> or the prophetic speeches put elsewhere in the

<sup>46</sup> 'Der Stein ist abgewälzt— er war aber sehr groß. Damit ist alles gesagt. Denn der Auferstandene hat ihn abgewälzt, indem er durch die verschlossene Tür durchbrach. Man läßt die Auferstehung nur durch diese Wirkung erkennen, die man sah; er macht nicht den geringsten Versuch, den Vorgang selber anschaulich zu beschreiben, den niemand sah. Das ist nicht nur bescheiden, sondern auch fein, und eindrucksvoll für den, der auf Leises zu achten weiß. Gleichwohl ist es der erste schüchterne Versuch, über die Erscheinungen des Auferstandenen in Galiläa hinauszugehen.' Wellhausen, *Evangelium Marci*, 136.

<sup>47</sup> Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus*, 357.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Henry Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) 97.

<sup>49</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewend & Garnier, 1917).

<sup>50</sup> Thorsten Dietz, 'Der Neupietismus und die Theologie: biblische, missionarische und mystische Theologie bei Adolf Schlatter, Karl Heim und Rudolf Otto', in *Was ist neu am Pietismus? Tradition und Zukunftsperspektiven der Evangelischen Gemeinschaftsbewegung* (ed. Frank Lüdke and Norbert Schmidt; Schriften der Evangelischen Hochschule Tabor 1; Berlin: Lit, 2010) 89–124.

<sup>51</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Mark, Proclamation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004) 110–12.

<sup>52</sup> Andreas Lindemann, 'Die Osterbotschaft des Markus. Zur theologischen Interpretation von Mark 16. 1–8', *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980) 298–317.

<sup>53</sup> James M. Robinson, 'The Gospel as Narrative', in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (ed. Frank D. McConnell; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 97–112. Werner H. Kelber, 'Apostolic Tradition and

mouth of Jesus.<sup>54</sup> Others postulated a violent protest against the Judeo-Christian disciples, who are disqualified by the Gentile disciples by saying that they have no mission.<sup>55</sup>

Werner Kelber's synthesis is a first direction. He takes up Wellhausen's argument that the absence of an apparition account of Jesus is deliberate because Jesus' mission is fulfilled by the empty tomb, not by his apparition. But he adds that the purpose is also to challenge the disciples: has the gospel not presented their failure from the beginning?<sup>56</sup> Indeed, if Galilee is to be the place of the *parousia*, as Marxsen had argued,<sup>57</sup> the inability of the disciples to go to Galilee marks their absolute fiasco.<sup>58</sup>

Delegitimising the historical disciples of Jesus in this way is not only a position on the text, but it is an ecclesiological view, a rejection of the mission of the Church, which has long relied on the testimony of the Twelve to establish its authority, as William Telford points out.<sup>59</sup> It is no coincidence that Joel Marcus portrays a community that becomes the mirror of the women—lost, haggard, terrorised, torn between fear and faith;<sup>60</sup> he merely echoes the criticisms of his time regarding the history of the churches' claims to power.

The other direction, beginning in the 1990s, is not so much interested in the first historical reader as in the current reader. David Rhoads and his reader-oriented perspective finally reach the same conclusion: the 'actual' reader is as disoriented as the historical reader, he remains in uncertainty. To get out of it, he must then make a decision:

The overall impact of the story might lead this first-century reader, like the implied reader, to face death squarely and be better prepared to testify for Jesus and the good news of the rule of God. At the end, although disturbed by the fear and failure of the women, the reader still might choose to speak the good news boldly in spite of the consequences.<sup>61</sup>

Mary Anne Beavis, in the 2010s, goes further by proposing that the reader should carry on the story: 'Such an "imaginative positing" includes the reader's own answer to if and how the messenger's commission was ultimately carried out: to supply their own Markan ending—or continuation. The open ending of Mark compels readers to envision their own sequel to the story, a sequel in which they take part.'<sup>62</sup>

With the strong affirmation that 'only the reader can bring closure',<sup>63</sup> the literary reading of Mark's ending comes to the same point as the historical reading: only an individual action – which can blossom in a collective atmosphere, but which remains a personal experience – can supplement what is missing in Mark. It is up to the reader, in a way,

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the Form of the Gospel', in *Discipleship in the New Testament* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 40–42.

<sup>54</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS 46; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 201–3.

<sup>55</sup> Theodore J. Weeden, 'The Heresy That Necessitated Mark's Gospel', *ZNW* 59 (1968) 145–58.

<sup>56</sup> Kelber, 'Apostolic Tradition and the Form of the Gospel'.

<sup>57</sup> Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (FRLANT 49; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956) 47–59.

<sup>58</sup> Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 87.

<sup>59</sup> William Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark*, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 146–51.

<sup>60</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (AYB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 1093.

<sup>61</sup> David M. Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 142.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark, Paideia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) 250. The same idea can be found in M. Eugene Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012) 449.

<sup>63</sup> Lamar Williamson, *Mark* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983) 285.

to make Jesus appear in his own consciousness. The movement towards a postmodern hermeneutic, that is, a hermeneutic entirely centred on the interpreter, is accomplished.

## 5 How does one Deal with a Text that No Longer Corresponds to a Postmodern Hermeneutic?

Coming at the end of this process, the writers of the Zondervan commentary find themselves in a delicate position. They too are part of the great postmodern movement that chooses not to read Mark's ending because it allows them to restrict God's action to the interiority of the soul, to focus the impact of the text on the reader's response, and ultimately to promote an individualism that questions an institution of which the Twelve are the foundation stone. Indeed, they make it clear: "The author intended to leave the reader in a state of awe. One must decide for oneself what to do in response to the empty tomb."<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, they cannot be satisfied with the option, taken by the majority of contemporary interpreters since Schlatter's 1935 commentary, not to comment on the pericope,<sup>65</sup> since they are part of a project that considers the ancestral King James Version to be authoritative – and we have just shown that none of the Reformers questioned this final version.

As the King James plays the same role for them as the Vulgate does for Cajetan, they are forced to adopt the same strategy. They begin by preserving the authority of the text by affirming its antiquity and the value of its testimony; then they use the doubts expressed about it by the ancient communities to distance themselves clearly from it. Thus, they too join the sixteenth-century cardinal, while standing in a historical situation completely different from his. They use the same argumentation but say radically different things.

For, as was said at the beginning of this investigation, the concern is no longer with dogmatic theology, but with practical theology. By directing the reader back to his or her individual response, postmodern hermeneutics make the text the basis for action. By calling the reader to situate him or herself in front of the text, they do not preclude the possibility that the reader's response may be to conform immediately and completely to the behaviours presented by the text. Mark Strauss's commentary, published four years later by the same publisher, Zondervan, helps us to understand the possible consequences of this: 'It hardly needs to be stated that the promises of protection here and in Luke 10:19 were never intended to justify the kind of snake-handling "worship" services practised by some sects (often with injurious and even fatal consequences).'<sup>66</sup>

The expression 'snake-handling worship' is a *terminus technicus* aiming straight at the Pentecostal churches who engage in the handling of poisonous snakes (vipers, rattlesnakes).<sup>67</sup> Based explicitly on Mark 16.17–18 read literally,<sup>68</sup> following the example of George Went Hensley (1881–1955), who passed away from a snakebite,<sup>69</sup> these groups

<sup>64</sup> Hindson and Mitchell, *Zondervan King James*, 155.

<sup>65</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Markus. Der Evangelist für die Griechen* (Stuttgart: Claver, 1935); William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (NICNT 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Gundry, *Mark*; France, *The Gospel of Mark*; R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (SHBC; Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); Marcus, *Mark 8–16*.

<sup>66</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 730.

<sup>67</sup> The same association is found in other commentators such as Larry W. Hurtado, *Mark*, Good News Commentary (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 278; Williamson, *Mark*, 288; John Dart, *Decoding Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003) 12.

<sup>68</sup> Ralph W. Hood and W. Paul Williamson, *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 1–12.

<sup>69</sup> Hood and Williamson, 37–52.

practise cults mixing episodes of trance in which music is omnipresent with the symbolism of the bite of the snake, associated with sin and death.<sup>70</sup>

Though regularly popularised by documentaries on U.S. television (Peter Adair's *Holy Ghost People*, 1967; *Snake Salvation*, National Geographic Channel, 2013), or by widely publicised news stories such as the Cody Coats snake bite on August 17, 2018, these communities are not numerous,<sup>71</sup> and constitute only a rather anecdotal tendency. They are clearly mentioned only for tactical purposes. They serve as a foil for the interpreters to establish the distinction made by the KJV commentator between the *normative* character of the Bible and a *prescriptive* reading.

## 6 Conclusion

The readings of the ending of Mark by Cajetan and the volume edited by Edward Hindson and Daniel Mitchell are so close that they could easily be united in the same footnote. Both intend to maintain the canonicity of verses 9–20, but both point out that it may be adventurous to build any doctrine or practice on these verses alone. However, while the arguments are the same, the historical situation of the two interpretations is not the same and, in sum, their statements do not have the same meaning. On the one hand, the point is to defend a conception of faith that does not depend directly on miracles; on the other, to affirm a hermeneutic centred on the interpreter's response, while being wary of its ecclesiological drifts. This example proves that taking into account this historicity of understanding is not an additional technique that scholars should practise after the long list of methods with which they are familiar. It is the very condition for understanding the work of their fellow commentators. And of course, it is the very condition of any work of understanding. Taking into account the influence of history on the reading of other interpreters cannot but impact the reader who embarks on a new interpretation. This is true in two ways. First, by ridding ourselves of the illusion that exegesis could be an objective science. While the statements of Eusebius and Jerome and the versions of the few manuscripts that do not contain an ending or an alternative ending can impress, what are they worth against the overwhelming majority of the best manuscripts? To reject Mark's ending, philological motives did not prevail, but rather theological considerations. One of the fathers of the critical exegesis, Eichhorn, saw this and concluded his examination of the question 200 years ago by saying: 'The authenticity of the last eleven verses of the Gospel (Mark 16.9–20) has also been challenged, not by critical, but merely by exegetical reasons.'<sup>72</sup> Then, by pointing out what is at stake in the transhistorical understanding of the text, beyond the specific historical conditions, this history of readings obliges each exegete to take a position with regard to its main issue: the relationship to the supernatural. How far are we willing to admit that the supernatural enters our lives? Who is ready, like George Went Hesley, to drink the acid from the car batteries on behalf of Mark's ending?

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>70</sup> Hood and Williamson, 102–17, 185–207, 170–84.

<sup>71</sup> Hood and Williamson, 229–32.

<sup>72</sup> 'Noch ist die Ächtheit der letzten elf [elf] Verse des Evangeliums (Mark. 16,9–20) in Anspruch genommen worden, nicht durch kritische, sondern bloß [bloß] durch exegetische Gründe.' Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das neue Testament*, 1.621.

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