

Gerasa

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Abstract. Gerasa (modern Jerash) was a city of the Decapolis, founded after the conquest of Alexander the Great, on the spice route between Mesopotamia and Arabia. It is east of the Jordan, and 60 miles SE of the Sea of Galilee. The story of Jesus exorcizing the Gerasene Demoniac (driving the demons into a herd of pigs, which then run down a slope and drown in the Sea), occurs at Mark 5:1f. Mark wrote Gerasa.¹ But Gerasa is an impossible setting for any seaside story. Matthew, coming after Mark, revised Gerasa to Gadara, only 6 miles SE of the Sea, but still too far for the pigs. Origen, after moving from Alexandria to Caesarea in 231, inspected the area and found a likely slope near Gergesa, on the eastern shore of the Sea.² His identification³ was approved by some copyists, who harmonized Mark, not to Matthew,⁴ but to Origen's Gergesa;⁵ so also some copyists of Luke.⁶ The error has thus been corrected. But the fact that it was made in the first place may have interesting implications.

Inferences. If "Gergesa" was right, Mark has *misheard*. He has recorded Gergesa (obscure for a Jerusalemite) as Gerasa (a well-known town). But knowing that Gerasa was not a *seaside* town, Mark has blurred it by writing "the *land* of the Gerasenes." Then the story was *told* to Mark, not *read* by him. How could this have happened?

The story emphasizes the ferocity of the demoniac, whom no chains could hold. It has a comic note: the demons ask to go into swine, and in that form are drowned. One imagines it being told with gusto, with the drowning as its climax. The meaning of the original story may have been merely the power of Jesus over the superhumanly strong demoniac. In Mark's Gospel, it ends with Jesus refusing to accept the cured Gentile as a follower, though unlike Mark's Syrophenician Woman (Mk 7:24-30), he offers to become one.

Jesus in Mark ignores purity rules, and so would not have hesitated to preach to partly Gentile audiences, whether in the Decapolis or in the mixed culture of Galilee. The location of this story in Gentile territory is thus not inherently improbable.

¹So the best manuscripts: Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, Bezae.

²Origen ad Ioann 6:24. For the date of this passage, see 6:1, slightly earlier in Origen's commentary on John, where he complains of the disruption caused by his move to Caesarea.

³But not his etymology, which explains Gergesenes as "those who reject" (ad Ioann 10:10; the local people's response was to beg Jesus to leave the area). It is more likely that the name derived from the Girgashites (Gen 10:16, Deut 7:1) who were long extinct by the time of Jesus.

⁴Though A and Family 13 instead substitute Matthew's improvement "Gadarenes."

⁵Most notably the Caesarean text K, which doubtless had knowledge of Origen.

⁶Who otherwise retain Mark's Gerasa.

The Jesus Movement leaders included Peter, who (so Paul, Gal 2:11-12), at least until put to shame by the conservatives, ignored purity rules in mixed company.⁷ Peter in Mark is a man of conviction but not of learning. He is brave (so Mk 14:54), but not subtle (Mk 9:6). He has a marked Galilean accent (Mk 14:70). Is he the sort of man who might, as he retold stories in his own preaching, embroider them with popular elements like the drowned Gergesene swine and the comeuppance of the demons, whose safe refuge has ironically destroyed them? I would say, quite possibly.

Galilean Aramaic. The possibility that Peter's oral recounting of this story was Mark's source for it increases if we consider that guttural consonants are known to have been weakened in Galilean Aramaic; that is, in Peter's Aramaic (Mark himself will have spoken the regular urban Aramaic of his time). If in Peter's case this tendency extended to velars as well as gutturals, he might have dropped (or weakened) the second "g" in "Gergesa," leading to a form that could be heard as "ger-esa" and misconstrued, by one familiar only with the larger Galilean towns, as Gerasa.⁸

Scenario. For much of Mark, Peter is the likely source, beginning with the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, which occurred in a private and not a public space. The stories of healing may have come from early contacts with Peter.⁹ Miracle stories like this are later, and may reflect Peter's preaching rather than his eyewitness reportage.¹⁰ That contact need not have occurred in Rome. Mark's mother's house in Jerusalem, a known rendezvous point for the early Christians, is far more likely.¹¹

All this is to suggest that the tradition that Mark wrote his Gospel with input from Peter, though improbable in the Roman form in which it is usually stated, may have something going for it in the Jerusalem form here implied; and that the claim that Mark was ignorant of the geography of Galilee and vicinity may need qualification. He knew as much Palestinian geography as any decently well-informed Jerusalemite. Jerusalem itself he knew intimately: street by street and password by password.

Mark is the Jerusalem Gospel.

Works Cited

- E Bruce Brooks. *The Divinization of Jesus in Mark*. Alpha v2 (2022) 78-89
 E Y Kutscher. *Studies in Galilean Aramaic*. 1966; tr Bar-Ilan 1976

⁷Acts 10 makes Peter the first missionary to the Gentiles. This is part of Luke's plan to reduce to zero the differences between Peter and Paul, but it need not be wholly fictional.

⁸See Kutscher **Studies**, who argues that these consonants were weakened, not lost, since gutturals were preserved in placenames. But placenames may persist in learned usage. I am informed that the weakening of gutturals does not extend to velars like -g- (Michael Sokoloff, personal communication, 25 Aug 2013), and mention the possibility simply as a conjecture.

⁹If, from the earliest material in Mark, we eliminate everything which did not have Peter as a potential source, we eliminate nearly everything. All that is left is the Jerusalem scenes (the Baptism, the Crucifixion), which Mark, a Jerusalem resident, may himself have witnessed.

¹⁰For the lateness of the Divinization material in Mark, see Brooks **Divinization**.

¹¹If we may credit Acts 12:12f, the Jerusalem home of John Mark's mother was something of a safe house, and perhaps a regular gathering point, for Peter and other Jesus followers.