

# Legion

by R. Garland Young

JESUS MADE A HABIT of confronting evil during His earthly ministry. He constantly found Himself in the presence of persons or powers who sought His destruction. Yet He never ran from these confrontations or gave undue place to the forces of evil in His life. The gospel of Mark reports that Jesus confronted and was victorious over all of the powers afflicting human life. In the first half of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus overcame several different types of evils. These included physical ailments (Mark 2:1-12), natural disaster (4:35-41), demon possession (1:21-28), and physical death (5:35-43). This series of encounters is designed to prove that the kingdom of God broke into the world in the ministry of Jesus (see 1:15).

In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus defeated the supernatural forces of Satan himself by casting demons out of a Gentile man. Jesus' exorcism of a legion of demons from a man from Gerasa is one of four exorcisms Jesus performed in this gospel (see also Mark 1:21-28; 7:24-30; 9:14-29). We learn in Mark 5:20 that this particular event took place in the region of the Decapolis. The Decapolis (Greek, "ten cities") was a region east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee that included 10 Greek cities. These cities had been given limited freedom from Jewish domination by the Roman general Pompey when he conquered Palestine in 63 B.C. While there is some confusion in the historical record as to the

exact identity of these 10 cities, the list generally accepted by scholars is the one provided by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23?-79). He listed the 10 cities of the Decapolis as Damascus, Philadelphia, Raphana, Scythopolis (only this city was west of the Jordan), Gadara, Hippos, Dios, Pella, Gerasa, and Kathana.<sup>1</sup> Some of these cities dated from the time of

**Lesson Reference:**  
FBS: Mark 4:35—5:20

**Right:** Mosaic from a Roman bath at Gadara.  
**Lower left:** A limestone snake that dates from the Roman period found in the Eastern Cemetery at Gadara. The snake was supposed to protect the tomb from evil.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ / ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF UM QEIS AT GADARA (8/33/17)

**Below:** The slope from Gergesa into the Sea of Galilee where Jesus cast the demons into the pigs.

**Lower right:** The Decapolis city of Jerash (ancient Gerasa) from the Temple of Artemis.





Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. Many were sophisticated centers of Greek culture and produced a number of significant orators, philosophers, and scientists.<sup>2</sup>

Scrupulous Jews in the time of Christ saw the Decapolis as a region of Gentile impurity. It would be no surprise to such Jews that demons lurked in a place so ritually unclean. But it must have surprised Jesus' disciples when in 4:35 He suggested that they sail across the Sea of Galilee to the Decapolis. When Jesus arrived in the Decapolis, He was immediately confronted by a demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs as a wild man, shouting and cutting himself with stones. Local residents had tried to curb his violent behavior by restraining him. But the forces possessing his life were too strong to be bound by mere shackles and chains (5:3-4). The demons within the man immediately recognized Jesus' divine character, for they addressed him as "Jesus, Son of the Most High God" (v. 7, NIV). But this declaration was no attempt to worship. In the ancient world, possession of one's name was a means toward gaining power over that person. Once a person's name was known, it could be used in curses or magical incantations. When the demons called Jesus by name, they were attempting to gain power over Him.

Jesus thwarted this power play by turning the tables on the demons. Jesus demanded to know the name of the demons inhabiting the man. Their response was, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (v. 9, NIV). A legion was the largest Roman military unit. A Roman legion consisted of around 6,000 soldiers, 120 horsemen, and a number of technical personnel.<sup>3</sup> The name these demons had given themselves indicated that Jesus was confronted with an unprecedented spiritual challenge. Yet though the odds were 6,000 to 1, this legion of Satan's hosts proved no match for the "Son of the Most High God." The demons immediately knew they had met their match in Jesus. So they pled to be sent into a herd of nearby swine. Pigs were considered ritually unclean in Judaism (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8). A Jewish Christian reader of Mark's Gospel would have found it humorous that these demons begged to be allowed to dwell in the most repulsive of all animals. The demons' plea to be sent into the pigs revealed their desperation when faced with the awesome power of Christ. Yet just as the demons' ploy to gain power over Jesus backfired, so did this attempt to save themselves. When Jesus allowed the legion of demons to enter the swine, the pigs promptly drowned themselves, leaving the demons without any hosts at all (Mark 5:13). Yet the destruction of the pigs was a certain indicator that such a fate was what the demons had desired for their former host as well. Like a virus, the demonic achieves its evil purpose

only by destroying its host. It must then move on to another victim. The power of Jesus had saved this man's life.

The different responses of the various witnesses to this dramatic encounter are important features of this story. On the one hand, the response of the swine herders was fear. They immediately ran into the nearby city to report the frightening event they had beheld (v. 14). Likewise, the Decapolis residents who had come out to see what had happened were fearful. When they saw what had happened to their swineherd and how the former demoniac was sitting composed, clothed, and sane, they begged Jesus to leave (v. 17). They evidently were more concerned about the fate of their pigs than they were about the demon-possessed man. And they were more afraid of Jesus than they had been of a legion of demons!<sup>4</sup> We are not told directly of the disciples' response to this amazing series of events. But material preceding and following this passage suggests that Jesus' followers did not really fathom the spiritual significance of what Jesus accomplished in the Decapolis that day. In 4:35-40, the disciples did not understand that Jesus had power over the natural elements. In 5:25-34, the disciples again failed to realize the extent of Jesus' healing power. It stands to reason, then, that the disciples were as dumfounded as the Gentiles when they saw what had happened to this demoniac.

The person in this story who showed the proper response to Jesus was the one who had been freed of his demon-possession. He begged Jesus that he might accompany Him back to Galilee. But Jesus sent him instead to his own people, the Gentile residents of the Decapolis. This man's response is the proper one for every disciple: the desire to follow Jesus (see 8:34). And the job the Lord gave him is the proper one for every disciple: to tell everyone what Jesus has done for him or her (5:19).<sup>5</sup>

The story of Jesus' healing of this demon-possessed man indicates that Christ intended to assert the power of God's kingdom beyond the borders of the land of Israel. And it assures modern Christians that no force either natural or supernatural can withstand the power of the Lord Jesus Christ to redeem people.

<sup>1</sup>Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.18.74. See James A. Brooks, *Mark, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 91-92.

<sup>2</sup>Rey-Coquais, Jean-Paul, "Decapolis," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 119.

<sup>3</sup>William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 184-185.

<sup>4</sup>Brooks, *Mark*, 91.

<sup>5</sup>Brooks, *Mark*, 91.

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