



BSFL & ETB: Mark 5:1-20



BY MICHAEL PRIEST

# GADARA, GERASA, *or* GERGESA

The slope of the hill from Gergesa into the Sea of Galilee; many believe this is where Jesus cast the demons into the pigs.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ  
(10/12/2)



**T**HE STORY OF THE Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5 is a disturbing narrative, at least for me. I am an Arkansas Razorback fan. Our mascot is a hog. It pains me deeply to think about 2,000 of my beloved hogs plummeting headlong into a sea of destruction!

Obviously I jest, but the narrative does raise a number of questions: (1) Why would Jesus grant demons their request? (2) Why would Jesus sanction the seemingly inhumane destruction of 2,000 swine? (3) Why would Jesus not allow the formerly demon-possessed man to follow Him? While these questions may be vexing, they are more easily answered than the question surrounding the location of the event. Mark and Luke tell us the event happened at Gerasa (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26). Matthew indicates it took

place at Gadara, a place the King James Version translates as “in the country of the Gergesenes” (Matt. 8:28). Where did it really happen and who is correct? The purpose of this article is to answer these two questions by looking closely at the text and investigating the location of both Gerasa and Gadara.

Before I tackle these questions I must confess that I, like all readers of the Bible, approach Scripture with bias. First, I believe the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative Word of God. Second, because of my first bias, I believe that when two or more texts seem to contradict one another our question should not be, “Which is right?” but rather, “How are all of them right?” By achieving the purpose of the article I believe I will be able to provide sound answers to the questions, but also dispel any doubt that someone may have about the veracity of the Bible.

Let us begin with the accounts Mark and Luke gave. Both writers indicate the miraculous event took



**Left: Church and mosaics at Kursi National Park that date from the Byzantine period; the church is near Gergesa.**

ILLUSTRATION PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/12/8)



place near the well-known city of Gerasa, modern-day Jerash in northern Jordan. The city was some 35 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Josephus, in Book 3 of *The Wars of the Jews*, indicated that it served as the eastern boundary of Perea and the greater part of the area was desert and rough.<sup>1</sup> If this is the Gerasa Mark and Luke intended, then their description of the event and the topography of Gerasa conflict with one another. Both biblical writers indicate the event took place near the Sea of Galilee and they both describe the terrain as hilly with steep banks. The well-known Gerasa is 35 miles from the Sea of Galilee and is not surrounded by steep banks. Both writers describe the destruction of the pigs as happening immediately after the demons possessed them and clearly state that the men who tended the pigs witnessed their sudden destruction. Thirty-five miles is a long run, even for demon-possessed pigs, and the pig-herders could not have been present to witness

the immediate demise of their herd if such a distance was involved. Based on the distance and geographical terrain, this Gerasa (modern Jerash) could not be the location of the event.

The area around the Sea of Galilee that best fits the description in the biblical texts is near the modern city of Kursi, the name of which is likely related to the Greek name *Gerasa* (an abbreviated form of *Gergesa*).<sup>2</sup> About a mile south of the actual city the terrain is hilly and a steep slope

is about 40 yards from the shore. About two miles from there are cavern tombs.<sup>3</sup> So seemingly, a lesser-known Gerasa (modern Kursi) fits the biblical description in Mark 5 and Luke 8 and is most likely the location both writers had in mind when they penned their Gospels.

Of additional significance, both writers indicated Jesus and the disciples disembarked their boat in the “region” of the Gerasenes. Neither identified the exact spot the boat

**Right: Hippos was located on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, seen in the distance. Shown are caves at Hippos; these were used for burials.**

**Below: In Jordan, ruins of the city of Jerash, seen from the Temple of Artemis. Modern Jerash is ancient Gerasa, a Decapolis city.**

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Capernaum  
Sea of Galilee  
Tiberias  
Gergesa (Kursi)  
Hippos  
Gadara  
Gerasa (Jerash)

ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

## WHAT ABOUT GERGESA?

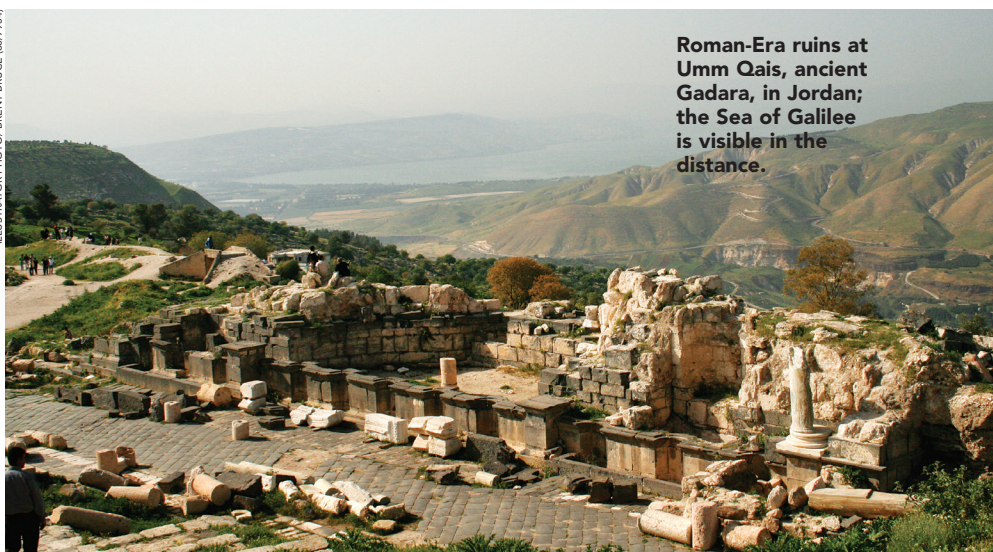
**T**HE KING JAMES Version translates Matthew 8:28, “And when he [Jesus] was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way.” Gergesenes? Why then do other translations have Gerasa? Some believe that Gerasa is an abbreviated form of Gergesa, Ger’sa. “The pronunciation of ‘Gergesa’ among the common people would almost certainly be ‘Ger’sa’ (Gerasa).” This corresponds with the site with a modern name that sounds similar, Kersa (also spelled Kursi). 📌

J. Soutar, “Gerasenes, Gergesenes” in *Hastings’ Dictionary of the New Testament*, StudyLight.org [online; accessed 30 November 2016]. Available from the Internet: [m.studylight.org/dictionaries/hdn/g/gerasenes-gergesenes.html](http://m.studylight.org/dictionaries/hdn/g/gerasenes-gergesenes.html).

landed, but simply pointed out the general region. So both agree that somewhere near this Gerasa (Kursi), probably two miles south, Jesus’ boat landed, He stepped ashore, and immediately a man who desperately needed a miracle confronted Him.

What then are we to make of Matthew’s account that the miracle took place in the region of the Gadarenes? The city of Gadara was located six miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee and was separated from it by the Yarmuk River.<sup>4</sup> But it was also about 11 miles south of Gerasa

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**Roman-Era ruins at Umm Qais, ancient Gadara, in Jordan; the Sea of Galilee is visible in the distance.**

(modern-day Kursi and the location Mark and Luke mentioned). Because of distance, Gadara is an unlikely location for a herd of swine to begin their death march to the sea. Josephus, however, indicates that Gadara was not only a city, but also a region that extended to the Sea of Galilee.<sup>5</sup> That region fits the topographical description of the event perfectly. In his account then, Matthew was not referring to the city of Gadara, but rather the region. This explains why he wrote, “When he had come to the other side, to the region of the Gadarenes” (Matt. 8:28, CSB, emphasis added).

So, the region of Gadara that Matthew mentioned fits the geographical description of the event; and the lesser-known Gerasa (Kursi), which Mark and Luke mentioned, also fits the geographical description of the event. What about the seeming disagreement between Matthew and Mark/Luke? Well, the lesser-known Gerasa was actually in the region of Gadara! Matthew identified the location of the miracle as taking place in a region, while Mark and Luke, using the Greek spelling of the ancient city, identified the location of the miracle as taking place near a city that happened to be in the region Matthew mentioned.<sup>6</sup> There is no contradiction.

Ever since Scripture was written down, skeptics have tried to discredit the Bible, and they will continue until the Lord comes. Time and again, though, with an honest and thoughtful analysis of the seeming contradictions, scholars and students alike have found the Bible to be consistent within itself and historically accurate. The Bible is truly inerrant and infallible and therefore our authoritative guide for life. We would do well to rest in the words of Peter: “We also have the prophetic word strongly confirmed, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19, CSB). 📌

1. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 3.3 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* [JOSEPHUS], trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 641.

2. James A Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 89.

3. William L. Lane, *The Gospel Of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 181.

4. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 208.

5. Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus* 9 in JOSEPHUS, 3.

6. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 192.

Michael Priest is pastor of Bartlett Baptist Church, Bartlett, Tennessee.