

The parable of the sower, for example, reflects the agricultural practice of the time. It begins with a farmer scattering seeds. In Palestine seeds were sown and then ploughed in. The ground was not cleared first: thorns and weeds were ploughed into the soil. Most of the seed would not bear fruit. As all peasants grimly recognised, hopes of a good harvest were not always fulfilled. But, Jesus says, sometimes the tiny seed is triumphant. For people for whom a tenfold yield would be a bumper year, Jesus' predictions of a thirty-, sixty- and hundredfold return are pictures of an unimaginable abundance.<sup>19</sup>

In that sense, all parables are risks. Jesus' parables might sow seeds of repentance in some people, but in others they lead to anger and resentment and a desire for revenge. These are not children's stories. These are incendiary narratives.

### 'The country of the Gerasenes'

Jesus' presence in western Galilee explains why Mark describes the next location – the country of the Gerasenes – as being 'on the other side' of the lake. Jesus is finished on the western side of the lake and decides to cross the sea. Even this does not avoid the crowds, as a small flotilla of boats set sail from the Tiberias region.

Suddenly a squall comes up, the waves beating the boat and threatening to swamp it. Terrified, the disciples wake Jesus, who stills it with a word, a miracle which more than ever causes the disciples to wonder who this man really is. The literal Greek sums up their feelings: 'they feared with a great fear' (Mark 4:41). Obviously there are all kinds of difficulties with this historically, but we should note first that sudden squalls are common on Lake Galilee. The lake is surrounded by hills, with narrow valleys running down to the lakeside. The wind funnels down these valleys, smacking into the lake surface and whipping up a storm. (During a visit to Galilee I was amazed to find that the lakeside terrace where I was standing was windless and calm, but that high, powerful waves were smashing against the jetty. Clearly they were being whipped up by the wind in another part of the lake entirely.) We should also note the detail in the story. Jesus is precisely located – in the stern of the boat – and he has even got some kind of cushion with him.

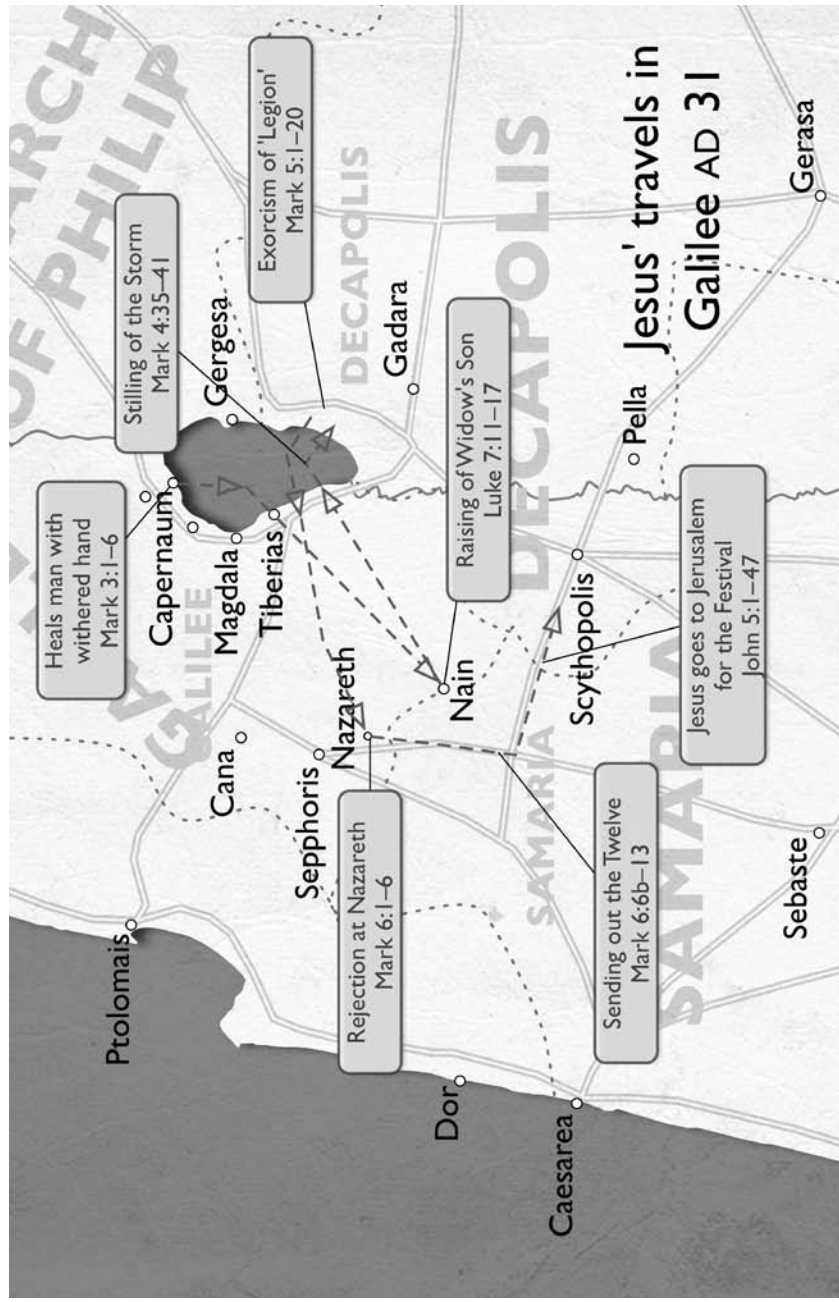
Whatever we think of this miracle, it comes in a precisely detailed and well-observed package.

Corroborative details, however, are a bit more of a problem with the story which follows. 'They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him' (Mark 5:1–2). According to Mark, when they come to the other side of the sea, they reach 'the country of the Gerasenes'. Since Gerasa was thirty miles inland, we can only assume that they had built up quite a head of speed.

Clearly Gerasa cannot be the precise location for this miracle, which sees a bunch of pigs plummet off a cliff into the lake (unless we believe that the pigs took a long run-up). Other ancient manuscripts read Gergasenes or Gadarenes. Probably Mark is just intending to convey the area, rather than a specific locale. We know that it took place in the Decapolis, a loose federation of ten cities and their dependent territories (Mark 5:20). This was a Gentile area (hence the pigs). It was the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Beyond this the empire ran out, on the steppes of the Arabian desert. Beyond here were the Parthians, the Eastern empires. This, as far as a Roman was concerned, was the last outpost of civilisation.

This is the most dramatic of all the exorcisms. There is the urgency of the situation: Jesus is confronted the minute he steps out of the boat. There is the violence of the symptoms: the man is unnaturally strong, he lives among the dead, he self-harms with sharp stones. In exorcism terms, this is the 'perfect storm'.

The Gentile setting colours the entire incident. We have pigs, for a start, unclean animals found nowhere on Jewish territory. (Today archaeologists can identify areas of Jewish settlement by the absence of pork bones.) Then there are the names. The name the demon tries to use against Jesus is a Hellenistic phrase, 'Son of the Most High God' (Mark 5:7). This would have been tautological (not to mention blasphemous) to a Jew: you cannot have the most high God when there is only one God. But in the Gentile culture, with their pantheon of numerous gods and goddesses, it makes sense.



The actual events follow the pattern already identified. The demon tries to gain control over Jesus, but is thwarted. Instead, Jesus demands to know the demon's name. And it is many. It is, in fact, Legion. He throws out the demon(s), who flee into a herd of pigs. Maddened, the pigs charge into the sea and drown. At which, however, the grateful populace beg Jesus to leave (Mark 5:1–20).

There are many questions here. Why does the demon use that name? Why are these demons so scared of leaving their territory? And why do the residents of the area want Jesus to go? The answer is that this is an exorcism with a political and military undercurrent. It has dangerous implications, this exorcism, and not just for the pigs.

The demon's name first: Legion. The usual explanation is that it is simply testimony to the multiple personalities plaguing this poor soul, enough to inhabit two thousand pigs. But it is a very specific term. It is not the Greek for 'many', it is the Latin technical term for a group of six thousand soldiers. And the word used for those pigs is 'herd' which, since pigs do not travel in herds, is unusual. But the word (*agele*) was also used to refer to a band of military recruits.<sup>20</sup> Jesus dismisses them with a military command and they charge, like rampaging soldiers, into the lake. Enemy soldiers being swallowed by the waters. There is a Moses reference here, a picture of the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites being swallowed by the waters around the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 15:4).

The reason why the demons enter the pigs is that they beg not to be sent out of their country (Mark 5:10). Why? They are a Legion. It is *their* country, *their* empire; the last piece of land before the barbarians begin. Like any troops, they do not want to desert their posts. And the emblem of the Roman legion which was stationed in Syria – the *Legio X Freitensis* – was a wild boar.<sup>21</sup>

So this event is drenched with anti-Roman imagery. Was the demonic possession of the man a result of Roman occupation? Had the fact that they were in his land driven him mad?<sup>22</sup> Was Jesus threatening violent revolution? Of course not. Was he sending out a signal to the Romans that their legions would one day be washed away and their power destroyed?

It is certainly capable of interpretation this way. The presence of Legion causes immense suffering to the man, causes him to live

among the tombs, with the dead. It defiles him. Their destruction brings liberation and freedom. It's hard to ignore the political meaning in there, intentional or not.

Whether or not this really was an anti-imperialist message – and theologians have played down these aspects for years – you can see why it might have made people a bit twitchy. This was a border area. A highly sensitive political zone. Indeed, much later, during the Jewish revolt, the Romans came to Gerasa and destroyed the town, butchering a thousand men and burning and looting their houses.<sup>23</sup> That event took place decades later, but it hints at why the residents were so scared. Stories like this had a habit of making their way back to the authorities.

This, I believe, is also why this exorcism takes centre stage in Mark's Gospel, why it is described in so much detail. We should remember that Mark is writing in the AD 60s, a time when persecution against the church is beginning to emanate from Rome. In AD 64 the Neronian persecution of Christians began: Christians painted with pitch and used as human torches, or dressed in animal skins and thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheatre.

There was always something demonic about the Roman Empire, as there is about every empire. They were a police state which dealt with the countries they conquered in a brutal and devastating fashion. They butchered humans for sport. They burned cities to the ground. They were capable of majestic acts, certainly, of art and literature and architecture. But for many of the people who encountered them during their time of power, that is not what struck them.

To them the Romans were pigs, their snouts in the trough.

'He strictly ordered them that no one should know'

There is another significant thing about the Gerasene-or-wherever-it-was demoniac: Jesus did not try to stop him telling other people about it.

The miracles on the other side of the lake, or further north in Jewish territory, are usually accompanied by instructions from Jesus not to tell anyone. He instructed the leper at Capernaum to 'say nothing to anyone' (Mark 1:44). In the event that immediately follows the incident with Legion, Jesus raises a little girl