



[Luke 8:26-33](#)

The Gerasene demoniac

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Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Luke

Reference:

8:26-33

Commentary:

Luke's version of the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Gerasa – Jerash was a Hellenistic city of the Decapolis, located between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee) follows generally the narrative of its parallel in Mark 5:1-20 (see also Matthew 8:28-34), with a few subtle diversions in the arrangement of Mark's material (for a concise summary of the comparative forms of the two accounts, see John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, p. 403-406). The man is not only afflicted with a condition that is causing him both mental and physical pain, but he is also ritually unclean (his spirit is described in this way in verse 29: ?????? ? ??????????) and a social outcast, forced to live naked in the tombs, which for an audience familiar with Jewish purity codes (the demoniac himself need not be Jewish for this association to still be made in the minds of Luke's audience) would evoke the issue of corpse defilement. For theoretical discussions of the notion of sickness and healing in Luke-Acts, and consideration of spirit possession in terms of ritual impurity, see John Pilch, "Sickness and Healing in Luke-Acts," and Todd Klutz, *Exorcism Stories*, p. 133-148, who cites (at p. 134-135) the rabbinic anecdote about the first century CE sage Yohanan ben Zakkai (Pesiq. Rab Kah. 4.7), who is said to have interpreted the red heifer ritual in Numbers 19:1-10 as an exorcistic practice to treat corpse defilement in a debate with a Gentile; he then immediately after gives a different teaching to his pupils, stating that corpses cannot themselves defile, and the ash of the burned heifer cannot itself cleanse. In Klutz's opinion, however, this story might suggest that those less enlightened than the learned rabbis may have understood corpse impurity as a type of demonic possession. A more immediate location for comparative sources than late rabbinic texts are various sources from Qumran, in which demonic possession sometimes goes together with impurity. However, no passages speak of corpse impurity being specifically connected with demons. The demoniac's question to Jesus in verse 28 fulfils the angel Gabriel's prophecy to Mary, Jesus's mother, in Luke 1:32, where she is informed that her son will be called "Son of the Most High," but the demoniac's defensive statement aims to try and dissuade Jesus from performing any exorcistic action on him. Essentially, as with the other healing and exorcism stories in Luke-Acts, the entire episode serves largely to make clear Jesus's authority over demons and disease, and arguably Luke makes sure to add the detail that Gerasa is opposite the Galilee (verse 26) in order to make clear that this particular example of Jesus's power takes place in a Gentile context (see John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, p. 406).

The fact that the demoniac is named "Legion" on account of the numerous demons possessing him has unsurprisingly led numerous scholars to suggest that an intentional link with Rome is intended here, as the name hints strongly at Roman military strength (this view is held, for example, by Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 191-194, in his politicised reading of the Markan version of the story). Markus Lau, "Die Legio X Fretensis," argues of the Markan account of the story that the reference is to the Legio X Fretensis, who participated in the Jewish War, and whose ensign was a boar (maybe reflected in the fact that the demoniacs unclean spirits eventually drown in a herd of swine). There is a difference between a wild boar – a dangerous animal – and a pig, however, so if there is indeed a connection with the Roman army here, perhaps it is ironic, the mighty army being reduced to a mere pig. The fact that Mark's mention of the herd containing 2000 swine may be based on the fact that in 66 CE, 2000 soldiers from this legion were involved in fighting Jewish insurgents. However, the Legio X Fretensis arrived in the area only after 66 CE. It was not there before, and so most likely was involved in fighting around Jerusalem. The Legio's role in the north, in Galilee, is less clear. In any case, Luke omits the detail about the size of the herd. Moreover, it has been suggested that the suffering inflicted on the possessed man perhaps implies the brutal oppression of the imperial regime. If the unclean spirits residing in the demoniac are to be associated with Rome, then the fact that they end up in a herd of swine and fall to their death off a hillside is of course significant. By this line of argument the allusion to Jesus's superior power over Rome, and the empire's



ultimate demise in a most degrading fashion need hardly be spelled out, and would not likely have been missed by Luke's audience either. As Mikeal Parsons adds, an audience familiar with Jewish dietary practice would have seen a further level of dark humour to this story (*Luke*, p. 140).

However, not all are convinced by the centrality given to this reading. Todd Klutz sees the military language as performing a larger intertextual function, and also views the context of Jewish impurity systems as being much more pertinent to the narrative than anti-Roman sentiments. The term ?????? (Luke 8:30) appears alongside various other terms in the account with both pagan military associations and the "story of Israel's God," Klutz argues. For instance, ?????? ("Most High"), which the demoniac uses to address Jesus here, is frequently placed on the lips of Gentiles in the LXX (Klutz cites, for example, Genesis 14:19, 20; Numbers 24:16; Isaiah 14:14). Similarly, ?????? (used in Luke 8:28 when the demoniac begs Jesus not to "torment" him) is used in each of its LXX appearances in the context of conflict between Jews and Gentiles (see, not exhaustively, 2 Maccabees 7:12; 9:6; 4 Maccabees 6:5, 10, 11; 8:2, 5, 27; 1 Samuel 5:3). Moreover, the use of ?????? (which refers to an underworld place where enemies of God are punished) to describe the fate of the possessed pig herd recalls several instances where it is used in the LXX for the waters which drowned pharaoh's armies, but allowed the Israelites to cross safely (Psalms 76:17; 105:9; Isaiah 44:27; 51:10 (see Todd Klutz, *Exorcism Stories*, p.101-102). The wealth of intertextuality, then, cannot be ignored, and certainly supports the case for the Lukan author's use of ?????? not being as individually significant as many scholars have made out in an attempt to politicise Luke's narrative. Rather, a more general point about Jesus's power even amongst the Gentiles seems to be the focus here.

Bibliographical references: Michael Willett Newheart, [My Name is Legion: The Story and Soul of the Gerasene Demoniac](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004)

Rudolf Pesch, [Der Besessene von Gerasa: Entstehung und U?berlieferung einer Wundergeschichte](#) (Berlin: KBW Verlag, 1972)

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Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



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