

Gergesa, Gerasa, or Gadara? Where Did Jesus' Miracle Occur?

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Christian tradition, at least since the fourth century, has identified Kursi-Gergesa with the miracle of the swine. But can this tradition be trusted? An Israeli geographer-historian gives us his answer.

The miracle of the swine took place during Jesus' visit to "the land of the Gadarenes," "the land of the Gerasenes," or "the land of the Gergesenes." All three of these New Testament variants have solid textual support. On the basis of the textual evidence alone, we cannot determine which of these variants is the original in any of the three synoptic versions.^[1] Despite this frustrating textual problem, we can determine, on the basis of geographical considerations, the location of the miracle. We are confronted by two questions. First, where did the miracle happen, or, what site did believers connect with the miracle? Second, how reliable, in this instance, is Christian tradition? Did second- and third-century Christian communities have accurate traditions about the deeds of Jesus? Before we launch into a geographical discussion, we must survey what early Christian writers had to say about the miracle of the swine.



Origen, Eusebius and Saba

Origen (3rd century) identifies Gergesa, an “ancient city” in the vicinity of the “Sea of Tiberias,” as the site of the miracle of the swine. “Sea of Tiberias” is also the name used for the Sea of Galilee in second-century rabbinic literature; hence, Origen has preserved historically reliable details.^[2]

Eusebius (4th century) contradicts himself: in one place he identifies a village named Gergesa beside Lake Tiberias as the site of Jesus’ miracle,^[3] while immediately before he mentions Gadara, apparently commenting on one reading of Matthew 8:28 that has “Gadara.”^[4] In still another place, treating the name *Girgashi* (the land of the Girgashites) mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:1, Eusebius noted that “others say that it is Gadara.”^[5] Thus, it would seem that Eusebius identified *Girgashi* with Gadara. Eusebius, however, sometimes mentions towns and villages that existed in his day, because of some similarity to a biblical site, without equating the two places; therefore, Eusebius may not necessarily be equating Gadara with *Girgashi*.

Eusebius’ writings give us the impression that he was acquainted with the textual variants “Gadara” and “Gergesa.” He locates the miracle of the swine at a village somewhere on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, but perhaps also implies that the miracle’s setting was the Greek city of Gadara.

The Graves of Gog and Magog

Origen mentions an “ancient city” named Gergesa beside the Sea of Galilee. At first glance, one might think that this is only a literary description. The term “ancient city” sounds suspect, yet Origen has accurately described the Gergesa of his day, as the following midrash proves:

R. Nehemiah said: “When the Holy One, blessed is he, shows Israel the graves of Gog and Magog, the feet of the Shechinah will be on the Mount of Olives and the graves of Gog and Magog will be open from south of the Kidron Valley to Gergeshta on the eastern side of Lake Tiberias. And he came until he entered [*nichnesah*; read instead, “Naosa,” i.e., Nysa Scythopolis].”^[9]

According to this midrash, the graves of Gog and Magog will stretch from Jerusalem to Gergeshta (= Gergesa), which is described as a settlement on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Thus, we learn that a place called Gergesa really existed east of the lake. Though its location was still known in Origen’s time, Gergesa was apparently desolate; therefore, Origen called it “an ancient city.”

Origen’s description of Gergesa enables us to understand how variants of “Gergesenes” arose in the gospel texts. Originally, the reading was “the land of the Gergesenes.” Then, the unknown “Gergesenes” was corrected to the known “Gerasenes,” residents of the famous Hellenistic city Gerasa. Those who were acquainted with the land, however, knew that Gerasa was a great distance from the Sea of Galilee; as a result, the text was “corrected” to “Gadarenes,” residents of another famous city whose suburbs were located close to the Sea of Galilee.

Incidentally, here we have an illustration of a well-documented philological tendency: in the copying of ancient texts, an unknown name will almost always be “corrected” to a known name. In the case of Gergesenes-Gerasenes-Gadarenes, therefore, we should prefer the less known place-name (Gergesa) over those that are better known (Gerasa and Gadara).

Summary

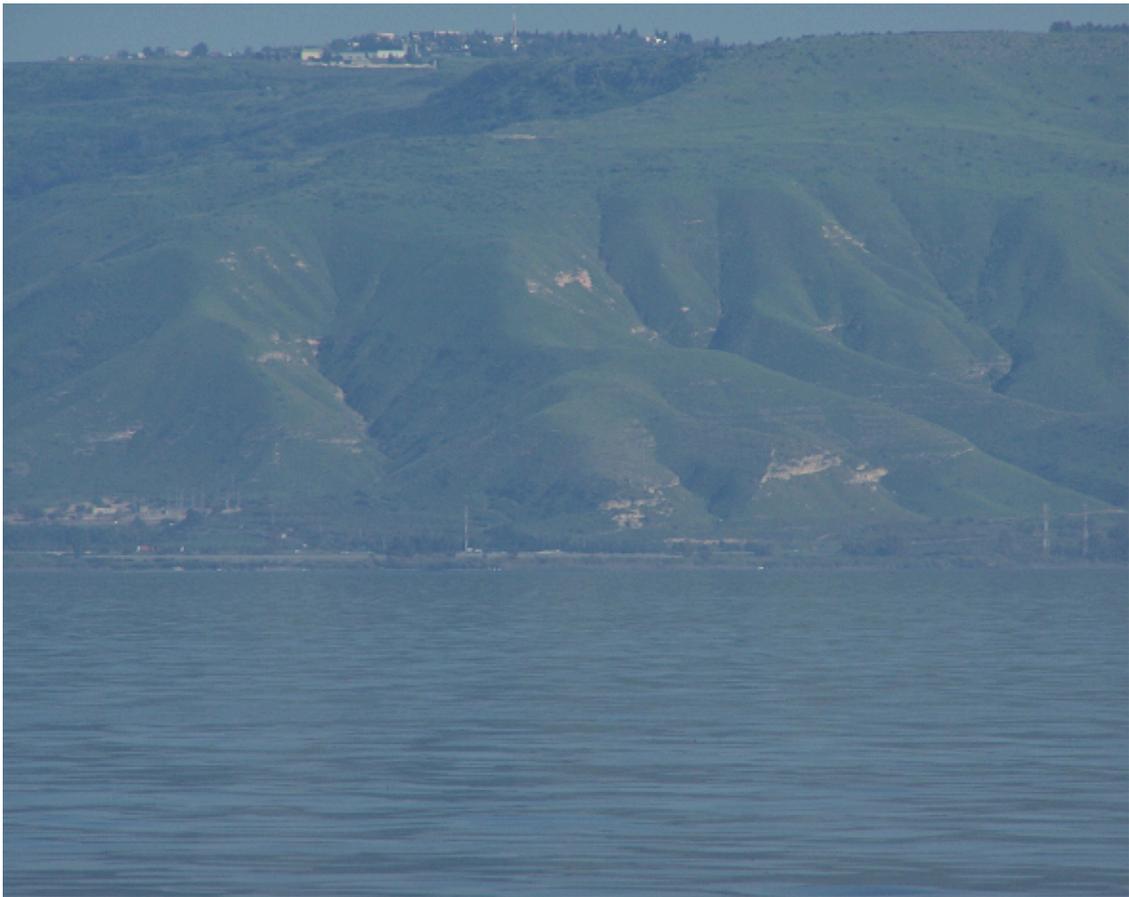
In the first century, there was a town on the eastern coast of the Sea of Galilee called Gergesa, or Gergeshta. Later, this place appeared as Kursia or Kursi in the accounts of Cyril of Scythopolis, and as Karshin in talmudic literature. Apparently, both pronunciations were used concurrently. When the miracle of the swine was first recounted, the audience probably was already acquainted with the midrash in Song of Songs Zuta that mentions Gergeshta. If so, this adds a new dimension to the story: Jesus performed a miracle at a site that was to play a significant role in the messianic age. The place-name was not mentioned solely out of geographical concerns, but to portray Jesus’ deed as part of a greater messianic task.



Remains of the western section of Kursi harbor’s breakwater (view to the north). (Photo courtesy of Janet Frankovic.)

To what extent did the early Christian community succeed in accurately transmitting the location of events in Jesus’ life from generation to generation? This question has not received sufficient scholarly attention.^[10] Here, however, we have shown that in at least one case—that Kursi-Gergesa was the scene of Jesus’ miracle of the swine—the community accurately transmitted the name of a miracle site.^[11] Apparently, Christian residents of Galilee, familiar with local geography, faithfully preserved this tradition.

Kursi continued to serve as a Christian holy place even after the Muslim conquest in 637. Numismatic evidence testifies that the site was still functioning as a holy place at the end of the seventh century. Nevertheless, most Christian pilgrims did not mention Kursi in their journals, suggesting that they did not visit it as part of their itinerary. One pilgrim who did visit Kursi was St. Saba. Another was St. Willibald, who visited the land about 724-730.^[12] Kursi also appears in Eutyches of Alexandria's list of holy places (10th cent.), and in a list of Jewish holy places (8th-9th cent.). This still unpublished list of Jewish holy places, found in the Parma Library's manuscript 1087/9, mentions "the memorial of Jonadab ben [son of] Rechab in Kursia." The document's contents, especially the term "memorial," identify it as the earliest known list of Jewish holy places. Although needing further study, the list is proof that Jews took over an abandoned Christian holy place in Kursi and converted it into a tomb commemorating the biblical hero, Jonadab son of Rechab. In the eighth century, both the Christian and Jewish inhabitants deserted Kursi. With their departure, Kursi's holy sites became relics of the past.



Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee viewed from Capernaum. (Photo courtesy of Joshua N. Tilton)

- ^[1] Matt. 8:28; Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26. For a discussion of the site, see C. Kopp, *Die heiligen Staetten der Evangelien* (Regensburg, 1959), 282-287.
- ^[2] Origen to John 6:41, chpt. 24.
- ^[3] Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 74.16.
- ^[4] Eusebius' wording and explanation are very similar to the words of Origen, suggesting interdependency. Both authors may have used the same lost geographical lexicon.
- ^[5] Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 64.1.
- ^[6] Cyril of Scythopolis 108.14.
- ^[7] Tosefta, Shevi'it 4:10; Jerusalem Talmud, Demai 23^d.

- ^[8] Y. Sussmann, “A Halakhic Inscription from the Beth Shean Valley,” *Tarbiz* 43 (1974): 123 (Hebrew).
- ^[9] Song of Songs Zuta 1.4 (p. 11).
- ^[10] For a preliminary discussion of holy places in Jerusalem, see J. Wilkinson, “Christian Pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Byzantine Period,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 108 (1976): 75-101.
- ^[11] An alternate Christian tradition, transmitted by Eusebius, places the miracle at Gadara. In my opinion, this identification represents a later development.
- ^[12] A reliable history of Willibald’s travels was written by a nun named Hugeburc. See J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims* (Jerusalem, 1977), 128.