

The Problem of the Grazing Herd of Pigs in Mark 5:1-20.

By Russell Morton*

Almost thirty years ago, I was a doctoral student in a class on miracle stories in the Gospels at the University of Chicago where we were examining the story of the Gerasene Demoniac in Mark 5. While sharing our translations, I was asked to read 5:11, “And there was along the mountain a great herd of pigs grazing” [my translation]. It suddenly struck me as a bizarre statement, so I asked, “Do pigs graze? The reaction of the class was a moment of confusion, and someone mentioned, “It does look like they are being treated like a herd of sheep.” Could this story have arisen only in a Jewish source, unfamiliar with the husbandry of pigs? There are two basic problems with the account of the pigs. First, is the description of the pigs’ feeding habits. Are they, in fact, grazing? Second, why were they described, contrary to all that is known about swine, as a “herd,” that stampeded down the mountain to be drowned in the sea (Mark 5:13)?

The Grazing of the Pigs (Mark 5:11)

Most modern translations of Mark 5:11 read that the pigs are “feeding” (NRSV, NASB, NIV, NCV). While technically correct, the Greek, βόσκειν, when referring to animals, most often means “to feed on herbage, graze, feed.” It is used this way in Isaiah 5:17; 11:7 and Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 6.153 and in *Sybilline Oracle* 3.789.¹ The term bears similar meaning in classical texts. In the passive it means either to graze like cattle or to feed.² Thus, while possibly referring to the feeding behavior of animals in general, it is more specifically a reference to herbivores grazing.

This observation leads to the further question, is this an appropriate way to describe pigs? Pigs are not strictly herbivores but omnivores, and while they do eat various plant material, such as roots, berries, etc., their behavior is not normally described as “grazing.” It is, rather, “rooting.” This behavior was noted in the ancient world.

The horned animals,³ both tame and wild, and all that are not saw-toothed, are all eaters of grain and herbage, unless overcome by hunger, apart

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from the pig. The latter is the least inclined to eat herbage⁴ and grain⁵; but the pig is most inclined to eat roots⁶ because of the fact that its snout is naturally well constituted for this activity; and it is the animal that takes most easily to every food.⁷

At no time does Aristotle describe pigs' activity as βόσκειν, to "graze." Rather, he uses more technical terms such as "living on fruit" (καρποφάγα), "eating grass or herbs" (ποηφάγα), and "eating roots" (ρίζοφάγον). This difference between Aristotle and the Markan account may, however, be of less significance than it appears at first; for the gospel writer may be simply employing popular language. Thus, Mark, or his source, may have utilized a more common and popular term particularly if they lived in a Jewish environment. It would be natural for individuals most familiar with the raising of sheep, goats and cattle to employ a general word for how these animals feed (βόσκειν "to graze," or, "to feed") rather than using Aristotle's more precise vocabulary. More problematic, however, is the description of the pigs' ensuing behavior in Mark 5:12-13.

The Stampede of the Pigs (Mark 5:12).

While the author of Mark may have described the feeding habits of the pigs with imprecise, popular language, the description of the stampede of the pigs is not so easily explained. Two modern commentaries take very different approaches. Adela Yarbro Collins,⁸ for example cites the essay by Roy D. Kotansky.⁹ Kotansky argues that the story of the Gerasene demoniac had its origins in Phoenician Heracles tales, which were originally told in the region of Gadeira in Spain, and later applied to the region of Gadara east of Galilee.

Despite the presence of swine in Iberia, there is some indication that Mark's herd (ἀγέλη) of pigs originally stood for a herd of cattle or oxen and that for important theological reasons the storyline has been reworked to create a group of grazing pigs, an animal considered to be unclean.. One of the reasons for this is that the Geryon myth, to which we will shortly compare the pre-Markan "Gadarene" account deals with a herd of cattle, but there are several other causes. Pigs do not occur in large herds; in fact, ἀγέλη the term twice used in Mark (5:11, 13) to describe pigs, is always used of oxen or kine in Homer.¹⁰

Kotansky's conclusion that the healing of the Gerasene Demonic derived from a Spanish Phoenician Heracles myth strains credulity. There is some initial attraction, however, to the hypothesis that the original animals in the

story were either sheep, cattle, or goats. This reference was altered in the pre-gospel stage to pigs. On the other hand, Yarbrow Collins dismisses Kotansky's conclusions.

Two arguments may be made against this view. First, whether pigs occur in large herds or not, some ancient people apparently thought they did.¹¹ Second, various kinds of illness were believed to be transferred to various kinds of animals in antiquity and the Middle Ages.¹²

Robert H. Stein, on the other hand, in his otherwise extensive commentary on Mark 5:1-20 simply ignores the issue entirely.¹³ Rather, he notes the spiritual battle that takes place between Jesus and the legion of demons, which "ends with the demons drowned in the 'sea.'¹⁴

Yet, the pigs' stampede may be a very vital part of the story, not because it is characteristic of porcine behavior, but because it is so contrary to it. From what we have seen above, the Greco-Roman world understood basics of animal husbandry, and how pigs ate and behaved. Pigs, for example, are not herd animals. Instead, they form family groups. Pigs, while easily panicked, do not stampede. They scatter.¹⁵ Many of the gentiles in Mark's original audience would have known these facts. What is remarkable is that the pigs act in a manner that is "utterly unpiglike ... If such a thing happened any onlooker would say they were bewitched."¹⁶

This motif is totally consistent with exorcism stories. Exorcisms often conclude with a demonstration that the demon has been expelled. The destruction of the herd of swine precisely fulfills such a function, demonstrating that the demoniac has been freed from his oppressors.¹⁷ A well known example outside the New Testament is found in Josephus.

I have seen a certain Eleazar, a countryman of mine in the presence of Vespasian, his sons, tribunes and a number of other soldiers, fee men possessed by demons, and this was the manner of his cure: he put to the nose of the possessed man a ring ... drew out the demon through his nostrils, when the man at once fell down, adjured the demon never to come back into him ... Then wishing to convince the bystanders and prove to them that he had this power, Eleazar placed a cup or footbasin full of water a little way off and commanded the demon, as it went out of the man to overturn it and make known to the spectators that he had left the man.¹⁸

Likewise, the stampede of the swine emphasized that the evil spirits had left the man. Furthermore, the dramatic nature of the pigs' destruction accentuates the extent of the exorcism and the power of Jesus. Rather than merely upsetting a basin of water, the demons cause the swine to act in a manner

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totally contrary to nature. They, furthermore, are destroyed in the process. The unclean spirits are too unclean to be contained by the unclean animals, and are ultimately destroyed in water, often associated with the abode of the demonic (Rev. 13:1).¹⁹

Conclusion.

In conclusion, while our analysis of the description of the feeding habits of the pigs is somewhat inconclusive, the discussion of the stampede of the pigs demonstrates nothing less than that when the swine became possessed by demonic spirits they were caused to act in a manner utterly contrary to normal porcine behavior. In the former case, either Mark or the pre-Markan tradition employed common language, possibly being unfamiliar with the more precise language of animal husbandry as it applied to the eating habits of pigs. The latter incident accentuates the magnitude of the exorcism. In both cases, the wording is at home in the literary setting of the story. While it is not possible to “prove” that the incident took place, the language is consistent and powerful. It is precisely because the fact that the pigs stampede, totally contrary to their expected behavior, that the reader/hearer of the first century encounters in the narrative the power of Jesus. He expels the demons with a word, which is evidenced by a mighty accompanying sign. The readers can do nothing else but wonder in awe and amazement at the power of this one whom Mark presents as “The Son of God” (Mark 1:1; 15:39).

ENDNOTES

¹ BDAG 181.

² LSJ 323.

³ Due to their tusks, pigs, particularly boars, would be included among the “horned” animals.

⁴ *καρποφάγα*, literally, “living on fruit.” LSJ, 870.

⁵ *ποηφάγα*, literally, “eating grass or herbs, LSJ, 1427.

⁶ *ρίζοφάγον*, literally, to eat roots, LSJ, 1571.

⁷ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* Z.595a 13-19 (LCL).

⁸ *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermencia; Minncapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 270, note 81.

⁹ “Jesus and Heracles in Cádiz (τὰ Γάδειρα): Death, Myth and Monsters at the ‘Straits of Gibraltar’ (Mark 4:35-5:43).” in *Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Bible and Culture: Essays in Honor of Hans Dieter Betz* (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1998), 160-229.

¹⁰ Ibid., 199-200.

¹¹ Yarbrow Collins notes the shield of Heracles, described in Hesiod Sc. 168, *Mark*. 270, note 82.

¹² Ibid., 270.

¹³ *Mark* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 253-57.

¹⁴ Ibid., 256.

¹⁵ J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Contributions the Study of the Gerasene Demoniac." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 3(1979), 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Gerd Theissen, *Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, tr. by Francis McDonagh, ed. by John Riches (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 89-90.

¹⁸ *Antiquities of the Jews* 8.46-48 (LCL).

¹⁹ Stein, *Mark*, 257.

Abbreviations

BDAG. Bauer, Walter and William Arndt. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

LSJ . Liddell, Henry George and Robert Scott. *A Greek English Lexicon*. 9th edition revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

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