

DEVILED HAM

by TRENT VOTH

Mocking the Roman Empire in Mark 5

Have you heard the one about the Rabbi and a man infested by a legion of demons that are on the beach near the Decapolis? The Rabbi orders the legion out of the man and into a couple thousand grazing pigs. The pigs march into the sea and drown. The townspeople tell the Rabbi to get lost, and he tells the disinfected man to go tell all that the Lord has done for him. So the man goes and tells all about the Rabbi!

Pigs, legions and lords—it's an inside joke. Get it? No?

I don't blame you. Comedy, like Greek, is hard to translate, especially comedy from a different culture, world-view and political context. Age it over two millennia and you end up with a story that seems more scary than funny. The set-up becomes the emphasis and the punch line is brushed aside and forgotten. That's the problem with a 2,000-year-old joke—timing.

Missed the punch line?

In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus casts demons into a herd of swine, emancipating the overrun man from the demons. We habitually view this as the culmination of the story. But what if we've celebrated prematurely? What if we have misidentify the victorious moment, thereby missing the punch line and misunderstanding the climax of this story of mockery for a weird moment of collateral damage and property destruction?

Maybe we have totally missed the joke, and it's about the pigs. The deviled ham, the soggy hoggy—that's the joke, and for Mark's audience it was therapeutic comedy gold.

Two thousand pigs near the Decapolis in 1st century Palestine. Now that's funny.

Not because this herd of swine is located in ancient Palestine; Mark clearly explains that this story happens in Gentile territory. What's comical is the size of the herd. Two thousand pigs is a massive swine operation, even by today's standards. That's a lot of bacon!

In ancient farming practices, pigs would typically be kept in a sty housing at most a few dozen. Just watering a dozen pigs would take much needed water away from a thirsty village, especially in the arid desert climate, much more all the grain they'd require. Pig farming was not a sustainable enterprise in 1st century Palestine and a herd of 2,000 swine would be a near ecological disaster to the region.

Who has the resources to take care of 2,000 pigs and what could you possibly do with them? It'd take the resources of an army to care for them. It'd take an army to consume them all, and in Jesus' and Mark's day there just so happened to be an army nearby.

The Decapolis was the headquarters to an entire legion of Roman soldiers.

This Legion staying in the Decapolis is no random military unit. It's none other than Rome's well-known Tenth Legion—Legio X. Mark's original audience would know Legio X well; you've probably heard of their atrocities too. They're infamous.



The infamous Tenth Legion

It's the Tenth Legion that destroyed the Monastery of Qumran, where in a last ditch effort to preserve their work, monks hid some of their scrolls in caves near the Dead Sea. It is the Tenth Legion that helped burn Jerusalem to the ground and destroy the temple in the First Jewish-Roman War (66-73). It was Legio X that laid siege to Massada in 71 effectively ending the war, and it was the Tenth Legion that was stationed in Jerusalem after the war, the only legion left in the region to maintain the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. This is the army encamped in the Decapolis during the event in Mark 5.

Historian R.W. Davis notes that Roman soldiers throughout the Empire got a daily ration of one pound of meat a day of mostly, you guessed it, bacon. This herd was always destined to be slaughtered by a legion, either one of demons or one of soldiers. Now the Tenth Legion's food supply has been affected by Jesus' ministry to release the oppressed. The Legion camping in the Decapolis feels the reverberations of Jesus' ministry in the region, they lose ground and possessions to this invading king named Jesus.

But that's not all. The Tenth Legion, just like modern military units and sports teams, had a mascot. This mascot was imprinted upon their banners that they carried during campaigns, on the silver they traded throughout their camp and on the statues and arches built in their legion's honor. The mascot of the mighty Tenth Legion, destroyer of temples and monasteries, was none other than the pig. No kidding.

Beginning to understand the joke? This is a story of Jesus mocking both Satan and the Roman Imperial forces. And the parallels go even deeper. The Greek word *agele*, "a herd," can also refer to a group of military trainees, and *hormao*, Greek for "rush," is also used to describe a marching army. In his article, "Spirit Possessions and the Garasene Demoniac," Duncan Derrett notes that, "pigs are an independent bunch. They tend to scatter when frightened rather than stampede. This is no longer a herd of pigs but an army marching together."

Even the march into the sea carries its own political parallels and humor. Not only was the sea a mysterious, chaotic locality of demonic powers, it was also the place where God destroys empires. What God-follower would hear of the destruction of an imperial military regiment in the sea and not think of Egypt's defeat and God's victory at the Red Sea in Exodus 14:26-30? Here again, the sea is the instrument used by God to conquer and subdue an empire.

Total victory

As theologian Joshua Garroway points out, "The victory of Jesus is total. He humiliates the world's strongest fighting force with absolute ease. With but a single command he turns the violent urges of the opponent against itself,

causing it to self-destruct.... (Just as) God drowns a mighty army in the sea; here the Son of God does the same."

Garroway centers on an essential element that Mark is preaching in this passage. The violence and force of the enemy are used against it. The empire is conquered through its own infliction of force—it self-destructs.

Garroway goes on, "Where Legion is irresistibly powerful, Jesus is more so. Where Legion is destructive, Jesus has the power to turn its destructiveness against it." This is Jesus' strategy. He embodies it on the cross. It's his instruction to his followers in Mark 8:34: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It will be through peacefully and faithfully accepting and enduring the empire's destructiveness that victory is attained. That's the mockery, the violence empires depend upon are used against them.

The swine herders gather the community. Their reaction of fear is somewhat confusing to modern readers, but to Mark's audience their fear is understandable, especially given the symbolism of the previous events. A legion has been cast out; the symbol of imperial dominance has been shaken. Their world is thrust into disharmony as a result of Jesus' arrival and power, and so they ask Jesus to leave.

Mark's audience would have encountered similar reactions. The Christians in Rome would have been seen as a discordant group, proclaiming a different "Lord and King" and a competing kingdom. No patriotic Roman would want such subversive, dissident Christians as neighbors or associates. Their community would see them as a potential danger, a cancer that needed to be removed. That removal—the persecution of Christians by Emperor Nero—is likely happening to Mark's audience as they read this story. They need some humor. They need hope.

Jesus has the ability to defeat legions and free the oppressed. True peace has arrived. Even more so, the tables have turned. The invaded becomes the invader, sent back to the Decapolis proclaiming the invasion of a new Lord and King, Jesus. That's part of the joke too. Jesus instructs the once demon-possessed man to "go and tell all that the Lord has done for you." Does he go and tell of all that Lord Caesar, commander of legions has done? No, it's Lord Jesus that truly has power here.

All competing empires and governments are a joke and don't stand a chance. It's the same joke Paul continues in Colossians 2:15, "(Jesus) disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Do you get it? It's an inside joke, but if you listen closely you can almost hear two millennia of Jesus-followers laughing.

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