

1 Kings 19: 1 – 15a
Psalm 42
Galatians 3: 23 - 29
Luke 8: 26 – 39

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

The events of this passage have always seemed a little strange to most readers. Elijah has just experienced a magnificent triumph over the prophets of Ba'al. The people who witnessed the confrontation have cried out that "THE LORD, he is god." Throughout the experience, Elijah is confident. He mocks the prophets of Ba'al and gives orders to the king. Then, when he receives a death threat from Jezebel, his confidence deserts him and he flees.

Elijah does not merely run away. A quick glance at a map of the Holy Land during the period of the divided kingdoms reveals that he fled from the Northern Kingdom to the southernmost city of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Beer-Sheba sits on the edge of the Negev Desert and it was into this desert that Elijah traveled "a day's journey" (verse 4).

Elijah traveled to "Horeb, the mountain of God". Although there are several mountains listed as possible candidates for Horeb, we do not know which mountain is the correct one. In any case, Elijah traveled even further into the desert; far indeed from the lush plains of the Jezreel Valley.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

(A personal note: The area of Gergesa – known today as Kursi – is one to which I have a very personal connection. I have served on the staff of the Kursi Excavation project since 2001 and deeply love the beautiful valley in which the events of this passage took place. A brief synopsis of the project can be found by following the link at the bottom of this message. – Paul Mc.)

The events in this week's gospel lesson are listed as having taken place in three different locations in the various oldest copies of Luke. The same is true for the parallel versions of this account found in Matthew and Mark. Some of the original documents say that these events took place in the land of the Gerasenes, referring to the city of Jerash. Others say that the land of the Gaderenes was the location, referring to the village of Gadera. The final candidate is the land of the Gergasenes, indicating the village of Gergesa.

The three names are very similar, which was most likely the source of the confusion between the three. However, Jerash is over sixty miles from the Sea of Galilee making it highly unlikely that it was the region in which this miracle took place. Gadera is about eight miles from the lake which tends to eliminate it as the location of the healing. Gergesa, on the other hand, is on the shore of the lake and is the only one of the three towns that is "opposite Galilee". It was most likely here that these events occurred. It should be noted that it was this site that was venerated by the Byzantines as the location of this miracle.

Imagine the reaction of the disciples to their arrival on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Remember that Jesus had told them to go to “the other side”. The eastern side of the lake was the region of the Decapolis and was inhabited by Gentiles. Observant Jews tended to avoid Gentiles when possible so the disciples would have been reluctant to go into that area. When they arrived, they would not have been struck by the beauty of the area (see photo right) but by the bizarre sight that greeted them.

Approaching them was a naked man who was screaming at them. They might have been able to see that it was from the tombs on the hillside that the man came. On another hillside, pigs were grazing. Remember that the most impure object for an observant Jew was a human corpse and that pigs were also unclean. Nakedness was also forbidden. Literally nothing was right with this picture! Yet Jesus responded to the possessed man with mercy and compassion.

Instead of celebrating that the possessed man had been healed, the people of the village asked Jesus to go away. The man who had been healed begged Jesus to let him go with him. Jesus response is to refuse but his instructions to the man are instructive to us as well. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Could there be a better description of evangelism? Remember that when Jesus later returned to the Decapolis, there were four thousand people waiting to meet him (Mark 8). What an evangelist this healed man turned out to be!

For more information on the excavations at Kursi/Gergesa, please visit
<http://www.jibe-edu.org/templates/cusjibe/details.asp?id=28237&PID=171167>

