

We Are Legion

“All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of a hill on which the town was built, to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” Luke 4

The people around here don't know my name, but most have heard of me. I enjoy my privacy and have no complaints about being a topic of conversation at the local temples, inns, marketplaces, and even among the Roman soldiers. When I do overhear gossip about me, I listen politely to the story, acting as if I've never heard it before, and then engage in the discussion that usually follows. My favorite question when the story finishes is to ask, "Where do you think he went after that?" or "Why wouldn't they let him get in the boat?"

It has been about a year since the nameless person I was became famous around the Decapolis. When people ask for my name, I usually say it is Ares, but sometimes I will say Rapha, which I'm told means 'healing' in Hebrew. The truth is, I don't need a name because I have used hundreds.

My family is of Aramean descent, and for many generations, we have worked the land and raised livestock. The Decapolis consists of ten cities located east of Lake Tiberias, which is also known as the Sea of Galilee. It is on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire and is home to Semitic-speaking people from several cultural backgrounds. The Romans liberated us from the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom and gave us political autonomy. I tell you this history only to explain that the Jews leave us alone, and we don't go across the Sea of Galilee or travel to Judea.

Each city in the Decapolis has its own governance, but Rome still exercises authority over the area. My people honor Caesar as a savior and protector, alongside the other gods of our traditions.

As a young man, I assumed I would join my brothers on our family farm outside the city of Gergesa. We harvested our crops and sold cattle, sheep, and pigs in the local markets. Pork of sale to the Roman garrisons was the most profitable work on the farm. My assumptions about my future changed last year, which is why this Aramean became famous.

I learned early the meaning of law and punishment as it was dispensed in our culture and under Roman rule. Our father took my brothers and me to witness the execution of a woman who was caught in the act of adultery, thinking it would be a good lesson for his sons. Being the youngest son, I had to look through and around the legs of the adults in the crowd to get a closer look. As we arrived, a soldier was removing ropes from the arms of a young woman, then pushed her to the ground and stepped away to allow a large group of people to stone her. They screamed insults as they threw rocks at her. She was pleading for her life, saying that she had been raped, pointing to a man in the crowd near where I was standing. I looked in the direction

the woman pointed and saw my oldest brother quickly look away, as though he were searching for a rock to throw. When I looked back, a rock hit the woman in the mouth, and a tooth came out in a splash of blood. Finally, the soldier stepped forward and ordered a stop. We watched as the woman struggled to her feet and looked at the mob. I could tell she was having trouble seeing through the blood running down her face, which was a mass of twisted flesh and broken teeth. The soldier hit her with his spear, ordering her to walk down a steep bank to a cliff that overlooked the lake, but she started crying, and her feet refused to move. The soldier said something to the men who had been stoning her, so they grabbed the woman and carried her to the cliff, as we followed them down the hill. When they got to the edge, they threw her off the cliff onto the rocks below at the edge of the lake, where she died. I'll never forget her screams and pleas for help from the gods, whose names she kept repeating.

My story is easily found, and you can read it for yourself, but you won't find my name. For now, we will refer to it as the Pigs at the Lake incident. What you won't read are the events prior to the point where the written story begins. One day, my father called me in from the fields to the family home. I stood as he sat down at the dining table and explained that he wanted to talk about our business and my future.

"I have been talking with your brothers about our farm business," he explained as he poured himself a goblet of wine. "They think you are not cut out to be a farmer," he said and waited for my response.

"Because I'm the youngest?" I suggested.

"I think it is more than that," he replied. "You are a dreamer. You don't pay attention to your chores. They see a lack of interest in the business and reluctance to properly motivate the slaves to get things done." He took a sip from the wine goblet and set it on the table.

He was right about the issue with slaves, and my brothers were aware that I became upset when I saw them abusing or punishing our slaves. "We treat the pigs better than our slaves," I replied. I could sense my voice was betraying my emotions as I defended myself.

"It is best that you participate in the family business at a different level," he said, and motioned for a household slave to bring him more wine.

"What does that mean, father?" I asked.

"We will continue to support you as a hired man without supervisory duties," he instructed. "You will move into the workers' barracks." He turned to the slave and said, "Move his things out of the house to the barracks." The meeting was over.

I understood what he was telling me was that my birthright was being taken away, and I would be no more than just a member of the hired crew doing common labor around the farm. My future was about to change. I was being disinherited.

Something changed inside me that day. Over the next few weeks, the reality of my status as an outcast started to reveal itself. The herdsmen who worked for my family now saw me as a family reject, as they shuffled me to the bottom of the pecking order. My compassion for our slaves was rewarded with kindness and sympathy as they realized I was no longer a slaveowner.

My thoughts about the future became dark and threatening. My anger at my loss of status, family, and future caused me to avoid my brothers. As a child, I would turn to my mother for support when my brothers bullied me, but she died when I was eleven years old. The best I could do was take orders from my brothers and act like I was indifferent to my loss.

My oldest brother was slowly taking over the business from our father and was establishing himself as the leader of the family and the farm. "The gods are punishing you," he advised me one day after I explained to him that I would rather not participate in a slaughter of the pigs. It had never occurred to me that the gods were part of what I was experiencing. Which gods, I wondered? Why would they punish me? How does one appease an angry god or gods?

At night, I would start to go into the city to find entertainment and escape things that I could no longer control. The people in the town were not yet aware of my disinherited status and were willing to show the respect offered to a member of a prominent family. I was welcomed at the local inn, where I found people who enjoyed drinking wine and playing games of wager. Soon, I would go to town most evenings after dinner and come home late at night. I started showing up late to work the next morning and finding places to take naps after lunch. My thoughts drifted to the comfort of drinking and being with my new friends in town.

Voices started telling me that I was being too passive about how my family was betraying me. "You need to fight back," the voices reasoned. "They are stealing your future!" I had no experience with voices in my head, and when I tried to talk to other people about voices, they had strong reactions. I became the topic of conversations, so I laughed it off and pretended it was a joke. Wine made the voices go away, but it was just a temporary escape. It became clear to me that the voices would not be ignored.

As the weeks passed, the voices increased in frequency and number. They never identified themselves by name; they just became resident invaders. In moments when I could think clearly, I asked myself why these invading voices wanted to live in me. I went to a local temple with the hope that the gods would be pleased with my offerings and obedience. I heard a priest at the temple say that the gods protected and blessed those who made offerings. I went to the marketplace and found a dealer in idols, where I bought one of the less expensive wooden idols and some incense. At the barracks, I burned incense in a bowl placed before the idol and asked the gods for a blessing. The voices continued.

One morning, my oldest brother came to the field where I was herding the pigs to tell me of decisions the family had made. "We have decided your insubordination and truancy from work are a bad influence on the other employees," he advised. He took my staff and told me that my belongings, which were packed and waiting back at the barracks, were ready for me.

“My belongings?” I asked. “What are you saying?” I tried to grab my staff out of his hand, and he shoved the staff into my chest, sending me backward. I regained my footing and blindly charged at him, trying to wrestle the staff out of his hand. He hit my legs with the staff and knocked me to the ground among the pigs who were scattered around me in the mud. I sat up in a rage and watched as my brother glared at me.

“You have disgraced our family, and we can no longer support you. Leave the farm and find work somewhere you can show up on your own schedule. Get out!” he commanded and walked away with my staff.

I went to the barracks and saw the bag of my belongings sitting by the door. I opened the bag and did a quick inventory. I left the bag open, went to the altar, and found the wooden idol. I placed the idol and incense in the bag and headed to town, not knowing where else to go. The voices returned, relentless in their condemnation. They told me how I deserved the abuse inflicted by my family. I was worthless and should hide myself from the world. The voices I had heard months prior, telling me I was a victim, were now replaced with voices of guilt and humiliation.

I walked into the city, thinking I would find my friends and have a drink. I put my bag of belongings in a corner at the inn and waited for the evening regulars to arrive. By the time they started to arrive, I had been drinking wine for a couple of hours. I ordered dinner from the innkeeper and another goblet of wine. A patron across the room looked at me with a smirk and said, “I hear your family fired you from the pig farm today.” The room grew quiet as everyone looked at me for a reaction to this rumor. I stared across the room at the accuser and shouted something at him. It did not go well after that. I got into a fight, and the innkeeper came over and told me to get out. Since I was getting the worst of the fight, I did not resist his order to leave. I looked for the bag of my belongings, but it was missing. My complaint that somebody had stolen my belongings was ignored. I left empty-handed, drunk, hungry, unemployed, in the darkness, and with no place to go.

I cannot tell you how long I lived in the cemetery. The voices now controlled my life, commanding me to cut my body with sharp stones. People in the city and some who lived around the cemetery tried to control me with ropes and chains. They seemed to understand that if I continued living in the cemetery, it was best for them. The voices possessing me ensured other people would not be possessed, even when I was out of control.

My personality and who I was changed based on which voice or voices I heard. I tried unsuccessfully to manage the voices. In desperation, I said to the voices, “Please, leave me.” There was no response. “I never invited you in, so leave me,” I demanded.

“Yes, you invited us in,” the voices replied.

“No, I didn’t,” I argued. “When?” I asked.

“When your anger left the door open,” they said.

The voices were telling me I had opened the door to let them in. After cutting myself with one of the sharpest stones in my collection, I watched the blood flow down my arms. I felt defeated and powerless. Then I considered shutting the door.

“I’m now shutting the door. Get out!” I yelled. No answer. “I demand that you leave me!” I commanded.

“You don’t have the authority to make us leave,” said one of the voices with a laugh.

When I saw the boat coming across the lake, I knew it was coming to me. Rather, the voices knew it was coming for them. The voices raged, they shrieked, they argued among themselves. Before I could make sense of what was happening, the boat was at the shore, and I was running from the cemetery to meet it. He stepped out of the boat, and the voices started talking to him, calling him by name, asking why he was there, begging him not to torture them. In my voice, they said, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!” I thought it ironic that the voices tortured me, but they begged not to be tortured themselves. They forced me to my knees. I heard him give a command to the voices and then ask my name. Was he asking me, or the voices? The voices answered and told him, “My name is Legion, for we are many.”

I didn’t realize immediately that the man had control of the voices until they begged him to allow them to go into my family’s herd of pigs that were feeding in a nearby field. The man permitted the voices to go into the pigs. Immediately, the pigs reacted as the voices entered all two thousand, and they started running down the hillside, off the cliff, and into the lake, where they landed on the rocks and drowned.

It was the same cliff where I watched a mob throw the young woman to her death years ago. It was the punishment I escaped.

My family and others in the community pleaded with the man to get back in the boat and leave. He gave them what they wanted and told me to stay and tell people what happened to me. I was now free. I had some forgiving to do, starting with my own family.

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