

## Who were the Gergashites in the Bible?

The Gergashites were a group of people descended from Ham and his son Canaan (Genesis 10:16; 1 Chronicles 1:14). Being dwellers in the land of Canaan before the Israelites took possession of it, the Gergashites are listed among the groups of people that the Lord promised to drive out (Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Joshua 3:10). God had promised Abram's descendants the land of Canaan: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Gergashites and Jebusites'" (Genesis 15:18-21).

The inhabitants of the land of Canaan, including the Gergashites, were wicked, and the Lord brought judgment in the form of the Israelites' driving them out and destroying them (Deuteronomy 9:4-5). The Lord had given the Canaanites time to acknowledge Him, but they refused. The inhabitants of Canaan did many detestable things, including sacrificing their children and worshipping Asherah poles (Deuteronomy 12:2-3, 30-31). They also practiced magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and necromancy (Deuteronomy 18:9-12). In these practices the Gergashites and their neighbors worshipped demons instead of the Lord, thus incurring judgment upon themselves.

According to Jewish Midrash tradition, the Gergashites may have left Canaan when they heard that Israel was coming, and went to Africa, which might explain why they are not always listed among the rest of the tribes of Canaan (see Exodus 13:5).

Not much else is known about the Gergashites; even the origin of their name and their exact geographical location within Canaan are mysteries. Some biblical scholars have argued that the Gergashites were later known as the Gadarenes, or Gergesenes (Matthew

8:28). Smith's Bible Dictionary interprets the word Girgashite to mean "dwelling on a clayey soil" and argues that the Girgashites possessed land "east of the Sea of Galilee," thus aligning it with the position of Gadara mentioned in the New Testament (Revised Edition, A. J. Holman, 1979, p. 116). But no one knows for sure where they dwelled. Although not much is known about this Canaanite tribe, the Promised Land of Israel includes territory formerly held by the Girgashites.