Belzebul w Ewangeliach synoptycznych
Analiza porównawcza Mk 3:20–30; Mt 9:32–34; 10:25; 12:22–32; Lk 11:14–23; 12:10

Abstrakt

The dispute about Beelzebul in the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' activity reveals not only exegetical dilemmas connected with the phenomenon of exorcisms, but above all the question of the identity of the Messiah and the limits of spiritual discernment in Israel. A comparative analysis of the key pericopes — especially Mk 3:20–30, Mt 12:22–32 and Lk 11:14–23 — shows that the accusation of cooperation with the "ruler of demons" constitutes a radical inversion of the meaning of Jesus' liberating activity and leads the evangelists to develop the problematics of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit and the eschatological struggle of kingdoms.

Keywords

Beelzebul, exorcisms, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the Synoptics, the identity of Jesus, the kingdom of God, comparative study

1. Introduction: the character and significance of the dispute

The dispute about Beelzebul belongs to the most important Synoptic controversies concerning the identity and authority of Jesus. It is not merely a discussion about the method of performing exorcisms; essentially the stake is the interpretation of Jesus' entire mission. At the center of the dispute are questions: whether his deeds are a manifestation of God's action or instead derive from demonic power; whether the liberations he performs signify the coming of the kingdom of God; whether one can accept that the action of the Holy Spirit might be misread as the work of Satan without thereby destroying human capacity to recognize salvation. The controversy reaches its climax in the accusation: "By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons" (cf. Mk 3:22; Mt 9:34; 12:24; Lk 11:15). This accusation is a radical reversal of the meaning of Jesus' deeds: a person is freed, regains speech, sight and integrity, yet Jesus' opponents present the act of liberation as a work of evil. For this reason the dispute about Beelzebul directly leads to teaching about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which here acquires the form of an epistemological problem — how to recognize the true action of God — and a moral one — whether a lasting choice to see good as evil is possible.

2. The significance of the name "Belzebul"

In the majority of Greek manuscripts of New Testament texts the form Βεελζεβούλ — Beelzeboul appears, traditionally rendered in Polish translation as "Belzebul." The form "Belzebub," on the

other hand, derives from the Old Testament designation Ba‘al Zebub, which appears in 2 Kgs 1:2–16 as the name of a deity worshiped in Philistine Ekron.[12] The etymology of the designation itself is not entirely certain; various interpretative possibilities are indicated: “Lord of flies” — the traditional understanding of the Hebrew Ba‘al Zebub, which could have been a polemical distortion of the name of a foreign deity; “Lord of the exalted dwelling” or “lord of the temple” — a reading connected with the form zebul, meaning an exalted seat, palace or dwelling; finally “lord of dung” or “lord of uncleanness” — as a contemptuous, polemical transformation of the pagan deity’s name.[3]

In the Synoptic texts Beelzebul does not appear as one among many anonymous demons; he is named “the ruler of the demons” — ὁ ἄρχων τῶν δαιμονίων — and functions here as a title of Satan, the chief of the demonic world. The accusation therefore does not consist in ascribing to Jesus contact with a lower-ranking spirit, but in ascribing the source of his power to the leader of demons himself.

3. Comparison of the Synoptic texts

3.1. The Gospel of Mark

The basic pericope concerning the dispute is found in Mk 3:20–30. Mark places his narrative carefully: he does not locate the accusation immediately after the description of a single exorcistic act, but embeds it in a broader context of growing misunderstanding of Jesus’ person. First his relatives declare “He has gone out of his mind” (Mk 3:21), and then the scribes who came down from Jerusalem state “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons” (Mk 3:22). Mark thus contrasts two erroneous interpretations: the family interprets Jesus’ behavior as loss of sanity, whereas the scribes interpret it as possession and cooperation with Satan.[4]

3.2. The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew preserves and develops several texts related to the accusation of Beelzebul: Mt 9:32–34 (the first, brief accusation after the healing of a mute possessed man), Mt 10:25 (the naming of Jesus as “Beelzebul” in the context of the prediction of persecutions of the disciples), Mt 12:22–32 (the main, expanded version of the dispute) and Mt 12:43–45 (teaching on the return of the unclean spirit as a further development of the problem of spiritual enslavement). In his arrangement Matthew presents the most theologically developed version of the controversy, connecting the question of exorcisms with the question of Jesus’ messianic dignity, the action of God’s Spirit and the coming of the kingdom.[5]

3.3. The Gospel of Luke

Luke narrates the dispute in Lk 11:14–23, and then adds the parable of the return of the unclean spirit (Lk 11:24–26) and the teaching on the sign of Jonah (Lk 11:29–32). Separately he places the warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Lk 12:10). In light of his theology Luke presents the exorcisms of Jesus more strongly than the other evangelists as an eschatological battle of two kingdoms: Jesus appears as the “stronger one” who defeats an armed adversary, takes his armor away and divides the spoil.[6]

4. Mk 3:20–30 — the conflict over the real identity of Jesus

4.1. Literary framing of the pericope

In the Gospel of Mark the dispute about Beelzebul is incorporated into the narrative about Jesus’ family: Mk 3:20–21 speaks about an attempt of his relatives to restrain him, and Mk 3:31–35 describes the arrival of Jesus’ mother and brothers. Between these fragments there is a polemic with the scribes. A typical Markan “sandwich” construction arises: Jesus’ family comes to restrain him; the scribes accuse him of acting with the power of Beelzebul; and Jesus indicates who truly belongs to his family. Such a composition suggests that the essential problem is not the technical details of the miracles but the proper recognition of Jesus’ identity: neither physical proximity nor knowledge of Scripture nor religious authority guarantees discernment of God’s activity.

4.2. The authority of the accusers

Mark deliberately notes that the scribes came “from Jerusalem.” These are not casual observers, but representatives of Israel’s religious center and experts in the interpretation of religious phenomena. Their presence raises the significance of the conflict: Jesus’ Galilean activity is subjected to evaluation by the Jerusalem establishment. The accusation takes two forms: “He has Beelzebul” (which suggests that Jesus himself is under the influence of demonic power) and “by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons” (which presents him as someone who uses delegated authority from Satan).

4.3. Jesus’ response

Jesus “called them” and answers in parables. He does not deny the actual exorcisms; rather he challenges their interpretation and source. His response proceeds through three images that formulate both a criticism of the accusation and a positive interpretation of his mission:

a) A kingdom divided “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (Mk 3:23). If Satan destroys his own work, his reign loses internal coherence. The scribes’ accusation therefore leads to absurdity:

liberating people from demon-rule would be a strategy of the demonic world itself, which is internally contradictory.

b) A house divided “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mk 3:25). The image of the “house” can denote both a community and a sphere of dominion; the demonic world is presented as an organized structure — not a chaotic collection of isolated spirits, but a certain “house” or kingdom whose logic does not permit self-destruction by assisting in the liberation of its own victims.

c) The binding of the strong man “No one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first binding the strong man” (Mk 3:27). This image goes beyond mere defense: it constitutes a positive interpretation of Jesus’ mission. Jesus is therefore not a subordinate of Satan; on the contrary — he enters his “house,” binds him and takes away what was previously under his control. Freed persons are figuratively presented as spoil taken from the strong man, and the exorcism becomes a sign of the real limitation of Satan’s power.

4.4. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Mark ends the pericope with a warning: “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness” (Mk 3:29). The evangelist immediately adds a motivational explanation: “For they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (Mk 3:30). In this context blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not a casual utterance of improper words, but a lasting and conscious ascription of demonic power to an action that reveals God’s liberating presence. The problem has both an epistemological and a moral dimension: one who sees good but calls it evil; who sees liberation and deems it bondage — in this way rejects the very instrument by which God leads him to conversion.

5. Mt 9:32–34 — the first foreshadowing of the accusation

Matthew introduces the theme of the accusation of the demonic source of Jesus’ power already after the healing of the mute possessed man. After the demon is expelled the man begins to speak, and the crowds state: “Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel” (Mt 9:33). The Pharisees respond: “He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons” (Mt 9:34). This text functions as an introduction and foreshadowing of the more developed dispute in Mt 12:22–32: Matthew shows here the process of increasing polarization of social opinion — the crowd recognizes the extraordinariness of the deed, the Pharisees do not deny the occurrence of the healing, but question its origin, shifting the debate from the plane of facts to the plane of theological interpretation.[5]

6. Mt 10:25 — Jesus called “Beelzebul”

In the missionary discourse Jesus prepares the disciples for persecutions: “If they called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” (Mt 10:25). This text broadens the perspective of the conflict: the charge of demonic character, originally aimed at Jesus, becomes a model of insult and accusation against the whole community of his disciples. Matthew operates here with a simple but effective conceptual play: Jesus is the “master of the house,” the disciples are the “household,” and the opponents attribute to the master of the house the name of the ruler of the demonic world. Such a transfer of the epithet from Jesus to his collaborators shows that the accusation is not merely a diagnosis of an action but an instrument of social and religious pressure against the community. Consequently the disciples should not automatically treat the label “servants of evil” as proof of their guilt; they may be stigmatized precisely because they continue Jesus’ liberating work. It should, however, be emphasized that Matthew does not eliminate the distinction between constructive criticism and persecution: in his context the matter concerns the conscious falsification of the meaning of actions that in fact correspond to Jesus’ mission.

7. Mt 12:22–32 — the most developed version of the dispute

7.1. The exorcism and the messianic question

The pericope begins with the bringing of a man who is possessed, blind and mute. Jesus heals him fully: the man begins to speak and to see. The miracle has an integral dimension — it restores communication, perception and participation in the community. The crowd’s reaction is expressed in the question: “Could this be the Son of David?” (Mt 12:23). This question is not yet a full confession of faith, but it opens the possibility of a messianic interpretation, which the Pharisees attempt to block: “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that he casts out demons” (Mt 12:24). Matthew clearly links the charge with the question of Jesus’ messianic identity — the aim of the accusation is to prevent the conclusion that the performer of the wonders could be the expected Son of David.

7.2. Knowledge of the opponents’ thoughts

Matthew emphasizes that Jesus “knew their thoughts…” (Mt 12:25) and thus responds not only to a logical argument but to the inner intention of the opponents. This formulation gives the reply a christological dimension: Jesus discerns not so much the sincere doubts of seekers as a reading born of deep resistance to the signs of the kingdom. He therefore does not begin by engaging in a theoretical discussion, but exposes the design of his opponents.

7.3. The argument from a divided kingdom

Jesus develops the argument known from Mark: “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand” (Mt 12:25). Matthew here sets out three images of social unity — kingdom, city, house — to demonstrate the absurdity of the charge. The accusation would be true only if Satan systematically destroyed his own rule; meanwhile the regular, effective and liberating exorcisms are not rationally interpretable as actions counter to the enduring interest of the evil power. Jesus does not deny that conflicts may occur in the realm of evil, but points to the inconsistency of the charge, since his activity yields constant fruits contrary to the dominion of evil.

7.4. The argument from the activity of the “sons”

Matthew enriches the Markan material with an additional element: “If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?” (Mt 12:27). The designation “your sons” may refer to Jewish exorcists, disciples or representatives of the Pharisaic milieu, and more broadly — to those who belong to the religious community of the accusers. By this means Jesus exposes a double standard of interpretation: if exorcisms performed by persons associated with the opponents are regarded as legitimate, one cannot, without additional grounds, classify Jesus’ exorcisms as demonic. As a result, the “sons” of the accusers become their judges — the practice they accept betrays the inconsistency of their accusations.

7.5. The Spirit of God and the coming of the kingdom

The central sentence of the pericope reads: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt 12:28). Matthew interprets the exorcisms pneumatologically and eschatologically. Pneumatologically — Jesus acts “by the Spirit of God,” his power derives from the Spirit and not from Beelzebul; the opponents’ accusation is thus a perverse inversion: what is the work of the Holy Spirit is called the work of evil power. Eschatologically — the kingdom of God does not appear here as a distant future; Jesus’ deed signifies that the kingdom “has come” or “has reached” people. The Greek perfect ἔφθασεν (ephthasen) indicates a real arrival and achievement of the goal, which does not mean the complete removal of evil but asserts that the decisive intervention of God has already begun.[12]

7.6. The binding of the strong man

Matthew preserves the Markan image of entering the strong man’s house: the exorcism is not presented as a simple technique but as a manifestation of the Victor’s authority, who has power over the owner of the “house” of bondage. The liberation of individuals thus indicates a deeper victory over the structure of the power of evil — the exorcism is possible because the strong man has been bound.[3]

7.7. The necessity of taking sides with Jesus

Matthew adds the assertion about the exclusive resolution: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Mt 12:30). In the context of the dispute there is no room for apparent neutrality: since Jesus’ activity signifies a confrontation between the kingdom of God and the dominion of Satan, every person must take a stand. One should, however, avoid mechanically opposing this saying to Mk 9:40 (“For whoever is not against us is for us”); the contexts differ — Mk 9:40 warns against appropriating good done in Jesus’ name, whereas Mt 12:30 concerns the fundamental recognition or rejection of Jesus’ mission.

7.8. The sin against the Spirit

Matthew distinguishes two categories of blasphemy: a word spoken against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. “Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Mt 12:32). This distinction does not aim to hierarchize God’s wrath toward the Persons of the Trinity, but to indicate different levels of recognition. Jesus in his humble presence may be misunderstood: a person then takes his person and action for something other than they actually are. However if someone consciously and persistently calls the work of the Spirit the work of a demon, he closes himself to the grace that could lead him to repentance. The “unforgivability” of this act does not arise from a lack of God’s mercy but from the radical rejection of the truth about one’s own state — whoever consistently calls light darkness will not turn to it for forgiveness.[4]

8. Lk 11:14–23 — Jesus as the “stronger one”

8.1. The exorcism of the mute spirit

Luke begins the pericope with the expulsion of the demon causing muteness: “When the unclean spirit had gone out, the mute man spoke” (Lk 11:14). The text shows the immediate, visible effect of the exorcism — the demon’s departure leads to the recovery of speech, which constitutes an empirically verifiable proof for witnesses. The crowd’s reactions are mixed: some accuse Jesus of acting by Beelzebul, others demand a sign from heaven to test him. Luke thus exposes the paradox of unbelief: the sign has already been performed, and yet opponents demand further proof, refusing to acknowledge the significance of the first.

8.2. A divided kingdom and a double standard

Like Matthew, Luke cites the argument about a divided kingdom, the question about exorcisms done by the “sons” of the accusers and the teaching about the coming of the kingdom of God. Luke, however, uses a different designation for the source of Jesus’ power:

8.3. “The finger of God”

The Lukan variant is distinguished by the term “the finger of God” (Lk 11:20), whereas Matthew operates with the expression “the Spirit of God.” Both expressions direct the interpretation of Jesus’ activity toward the direct action of God, but Luke’s choice of the image “finger” evokes a specific network of Old Testament allusions. The most obvious parallel is the statement of the Egyptian magicians toward the signs of Moses and Aaron: “This is the finger of God” (Exod 8:19). This reminiscence suggests that Jesus’ power surpasses the opponents’ abilities in an analogous way to how the action of Yahweh in the Exodus surpassed the arts of the Egyptian magicians. The motif of the “finger of God” can thus point to a new Exodus: a person is led out of bondage, the oppressor’s power is broken, God’s action becomes recognizable, and the kingdom of God enters the sphere of bondage. Read in this way the metaphor emphasizes the eschatological dimension of Jesus’ deeds as a continuation and fulfillment of God’s saving acts in Israel’s history.[12]

8.4. The armed strong man and the stronger adversary

Luke expands the parable of the strong man toward an explicitly military image: “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away his armor on which he relied and divides his spoil” (Lk 11:21–22). In this depiction Satan is presented as an armed guardian, a ruler who protects his domain, someone who relies on his own weaponry. By contrast Jesus appears as the “stronger one,” the victor who takes away the opponent’s weapon and distributes the spoil. The designation “stronger” recalls John the Baptist’s earlier announcement about the coming of someone “stronger” than himself, and Luke thereby seems to stress that Jesus is not merely a prophet or an exorcising wonder-worker, but the eschatological victor over the power of evil. This reinforces the martial, liberative character of Jesus’ mission and highlights his lordship over demonic forces.[3]

8.5. Gathering and scattering

As in Matthew, Luke concludes the essential part of the dispute with the words: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Lk 11:23). The image of “gathering” here carries multiple meanings: it can signify the bringing together of the scattered people, the restoration of persons to community, participation in the mission of the kingdom — it is the opposite of demonic disintegration. Jesus “gathers” because he restores a person’s unity, speech and freedom; Satan “scatters” because he isolates, divides and enslaves. These words thus reinforce the contrast scheme: Jesus’ activity is integrating and saving, the opponent’s activity is divisive and enslaving.

9. Mt 12:43–45 and Lk 11:24–26 — the return of the unclean spirit

Both Synoptic texts place after the dispute a parable about an unclean spirit that leaves a person, wanders through waterless places, and then returns with seven spirits more evil than itself. The text should not be read as a simple description of the mechanics of possession; its sense is primarily theological. The parable indicates that mere liberation is not yet the fullness of salvation: a person cannot remain only an “emptied house.” He needs the positive indwelling of God, lasting repentance and participation in the kingdom. The most important message is: liberation without transformation can be unstable; the removal of evil is not sufficient without the acceptance of good; spiritual neutrality is impossible; the freed person must enter into a new relationship with God. Matthew additionally relates the parable to “this perverse generation,” which shifts the focus from the fate of an individual to the collective danger: a generation that experiences Jesus’ activity yet does not accept it may find itself in a worse state than before.

10. Luke 12:10 — the relocation of the teaching on blasphemy

Luke does not preserve the logion about blasphemy against the Spirit in the immediate context of the dispute about Beelzebul; he transfers it to a speech addressed to the disciples: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven” (Luke 12:10). In the immediate context of this chapter the matter concerns public confession of Jesus, persecutions, standing before authorities and the help of the Holy Spirit in bearing witness. This transfer of the logion changes its function: in Matthew and Mark the warning was directed primarily at Jesus’ opponents; in Luke it also becomes a warning for the community of disciples. The Holy Spirit in this perspective is the one who acts in Jesus’ exorcisms, makes the kingdom present, leads the disciples and gives them words during persecutions. Rejection of the Spirit therefore means not only a mistaken evaluation of a miracle but also opposition to the whole divine testimony about Jesus and the rejection of the power that enables and defends witnesses.[4]

11. The principal differences among the Synoptics

11.1. Place and circumstances of the dispute

Mark does not present directly the miracle preceding the accusation; he focuses on the escalating conflict and the mistaken recognition of Jesus by his family and by the scribes. Matthew places the dispute after the healing of a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and introduces the crowd’s question about “the Son of David,” giving the scene a distinct messianic character. Luke describes the expulsion of the demon of dumbness, adding the

information that some observers demand a sign from heaven, which deepens the theme of unbelief and the testing of Jesus. These narrative differences correspond to different theological emphases and editorial intentions of the evangelists.

11.2. Identity of the accusers

In Mark the accusers are “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem”; in Matthew — the Pharisees; in Luke they remain unspecified, functioning as “some” from the crowd. These differences correlate with the theological concerns of the individual evangelists: Mark emphasizes the conflict with the Jerusalem authority, Matthew concentrates on the dispute with the Pharisees, and Luke highlights the division within the crowd and the mass character of the controversy.

11.3. The designation of divine power

Mark frames Jesus’ activity by the warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; Matthew states explicitly that Jesus casts out demons “by the Spirit of God”; Luke uses the image of “the finger of God.” The different formulations do not imply theological contradictions: all indicate that Jesus’ exorcisms are a direct action of God and a sign of the coming of his reign. The lexical diversity rather reflects different traditions and editorial preferences than fundamental divergences in the communities’ faith.

11.4. The image of victory

Mark and Matthew employ the image of binding the strong man and plundering his house; Luke, however, develops this image toward a military scene in which the stronger overcomes an armed guard, takes away his weapon and distributes the spoils. Consequently, it is Luke who most strongly emphasizes the military and eschatological character of Jesus’ mission, highlighting the element of victory and subordination of the forces of evil.

11.5. Blasphemy against the Spirit

In Mark the speech about the “eternal sin” is directly connected with attributing to Jesus an unclean spirit; Matthew formulates the lack of forgiveness “neither in this age nor in the age to come”; Luke transfers the statement into the context of the disciples’ testimony and persecutions. These contextual differences affect the function of the logion within each evangelist’s narrative.

12. The problem of Synoptic sources

Accepting the commonly used hypothesis of Markan priority, Mark 3:22–30 may represent the oldest literarily preserved version of the controversy. Matthew uses Markan material but at the

same time combines it with the tradition common to Luke; hence the versions of Matthew and Luke contain elements absent in Mark. The redactional and thematic differences should be read as testimony to the work of tradition and editors in adapting this material to the theological and pastoral needs of their communities.[5]

13. The comparative-religious background of the dispute

13.1. Exorcisms in Judaism

In light of the Synoptic material it should be emphasized that exorcisms were not an absolutely foreign or eccentric phenomenon in Judaism. The Jewish milieu knew prayers, formulas and practices related to release from evil spirits; this comparative-religious perspective also explains the sense of Jesus' question about the "sons" of his opponents. Jesus' originality therefore does not consist merely in performing exorcisms, but in the quality of his action. The Synoptic accounts highlight above all the immediacy of Jesus' command, his personal authority, the lack of recourse to an external magical technique, and the connection of exorcisms with the coming of the kingdom of God and their presentation as an element of the final defeat of Satan. Jesus is not portrayed as a magician manipulating hidden forces, but as a representative and bearer of God's royal power who by his action brings about real liberation.

13.2. The accusation of magic as a strategy of delegitimization

In the context of ancient thought remarkable deeds could be interpreted in at least several ways: as a miracle originating from God, prophetic activity, magic, cooperation with spirits or manipulation of demonic powers. When Jesus' opponents could not deny the effectiveness of his deeds, they habitually undermined their source — a classic strategy of delegitimizing charismatic authority. The fact remains, but its interpretation is changed. The Synoptic response is programmatic: the criterion of recognition should be read from the effects of Jesus' activity. What matters is the limitation of evil, the restoration of personal integrity, the reintegration of the excluded into the community and the presence of God's reign in the works of liberation. From this perspective, liberating deeds cannot be conceived as the triumph of enslaving power, but as a manifestation of God's prerogative against the power of destruction.

14. Main theological significance

14.1. Exorcisms as signs of the kingdom

The most important theological assertion of the pericope is not the mere denial of the accusation of cooperation with Beelzebul, but the proclamation: "The kingdom of God has come upon you." Exorcisms function here as visible signs that God is recovering what has been subjected to the

violence of evil. The kingdom is revealed not only in words; it is revealed and realized in the concrete restoration of the person to freedom. Therefore exorcisms are semantically and functionally embedded in the eschatological breakthrough that the Synoptics announce as already initiated by Jesus.

14.2. Christology of the “stronger”

The Synoptic material consistently portrays Jesus as the “stronger” — the one who enters the domain of the adversary, binds the strong man, takes away his spoil, deprives him of his weapon and frees those who were under his influence. In this perspective Jesus is not one participant among the world of spiritual powers; he possesses authority surpassing the power of Satan. This christological image emphasizes the primacy of God’s authority over the powers of evil and constitutes the interpretative axis of the Synoptic testimony about exorcisms.

14.3. Pneumatology

Jesus’ activity in the Synoptic portrayal is above all the action of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit appears here as the direct antithesis of the unclean spirit: whereas the unclean spirit robs a person of speech, freedom and integrity, the Spirit of God restores the capacity for relation, knowledge and response to God. Hence blasphemy against the Spirit is presented as especially grave — it is not merely an insult, but an inversion of the order that enables recognition and acceptance of God’s liberation. Calling the work of the Spirit “the work of a demon” is an interpretative policy that reverses moral signs and blocks the way to repentance.

14.4. An anthropology of liberation

The restoration of speech and sight in the healed persons in the pericopes is not an accidental narrative detail but a carrier of biblical symbolism: the saved person again becomes able to see reality, to recognize God’s work, to speak and to give testimony and to return to relationship with the community. Demonization is taken up in Synoptic discourse as the disintegration of the person — isolation, the removal of the capacities of communication and relation. Salvation is the reconstitution of the unity of the person and its function within the community of believers.

15. What is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit?

Analysis of the Synoptic context allows one to disqualify a number of false interpretations of blasphemy against the Spirit. It is not a single word spoken in passion, an intrusive thought, an ordinary religious doubt, a crisis of faith, a sin that a person repents of, nor the condition of a person afraid of losing the possibility of forgiveness. In the pericopes the matter concerns a conscious and sustained reversal of the moral and epistemic meaning of reality: the opponents observe the liberation of a person yet immediately and without seeking explanation call it the

work of a demon. There is no question here of motivation nor expressions of uncertainty; an accusation is formulated that aims to prevent others from recognizing God's action. The sin becomes "unpardonable" because it contains within itself the rejection of the path that leads to pardon — the person closes himself off to the truth of the Spirit who convinces of sin and leads to repentance. As long as there is authentic contrition, the desire for reconciliation and fear of losing God, we cannot speak of the definitive state described in the pericope.

16. A comparative synthesis

From a comparison of the three Synoptic Gospels a common core of tradition emerges. First: Jesus truly frees people from evil spirits; the opponents do not deny the effectiveness of his deeds but attribute them to Beelzebul. Second: Jesus demonstrates the absurdity of the claim that Satan would systematically destroy his own kingdom — this tautology serves to unmask the accusation. Third: exorcisms become testimony that Satan's power has been attacked by someone stronger; in Jesus' activity the kingdom of God has entered history. Fourth: the source of Jesus' power is the Spirit of God, not the demonic world; attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to an unclean spirit can lead to a radical closure to forgiveness.

At the same time each evangelist develops this core in a different way. Mark emphasizes the drama of the mistaken recognition of Jesus and the hardness of the religious experts; Matthew expands the messianic, pneumatological and judicial dimension of the dispute; Luke, in turn, emphasizes a new aspect of the Exodus motif, the "finger of God" motif and the victory of the "stronger" over an armed ruler of bondage.

Conclusion

The dispute about Beelzebul constitutes in the Synoptic narrative one of the sharpest points of conflict between Jesus and his opponents, because it concerns not only the assessment of a single miracle but the fundamental capacity to recognize God's action. Jesus' exorcisms are a sign of an initiated eschatological rupture: the kingdom of Satan is not strengthened but disrupted; the "strong man" is bound, his weapon is taken away, and his "property" is liberated. The greatest danger therefore does not lie in the mere presence of evil but in such a distortion of conscience in which a person begins to call liberation bondage, mercy a deception, and the Spirit of God an unclean spirit. The Synoptic response is unambiguous: Jesus does not defeat demons by compromise with their ruler, but because he is the "stronger," acts in the Spirit of God and makes present a kingdom in which the person regains freedom, speech, sight and the capacity to recognize the truth.

Notes

1. Cf. Mark 3:22–30; Matthew 12:22–37; Luke 11:14–23 (bibliographic reference to the Synoptic pericopes).
2. On the Q hypothesis and its reconstruction see John S. Kloppenborg, Q: The Earliest Gospel (1992).
3. On exorcisms and their Jewish context see Geza Vermes, Jesus the Jew (1973).
4. Synthetic commentaries: Joel Marcus, The Gospel of Mark (Apostle & the Messiah); Matthew: R. T. France, The Gospel of Matthew (2007); Luke: John Nolland, Luke (1993).
5. On source questions and the relation of Matthew and Luke to Mark see J. Marcus, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
6. Cf. Lk 11:14–23; 11:24–26; 11:29–32; 12:10 (Biblia Tysiąclecia).