1 Demonology in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Death, Accusation, and Liberation in Hebrews 2:14–15

1.1 Introduction: demonology subordinated to soteriology

The Epistle to the Hebrews, described by its author himself as *logos tēs paraklēseōs* — "the word of encouragement" (Heb. 13:22), does not begin like an ordinary letter and does not name its author. Its form most fully corresponds to a carefully composed homily or a parenetic-theological speech, in which rhetoric of consolation and admonition is interwoven with dense theology of the incarnation, sacrifice, high priesthood, and eschatological hope. The author does not produce a treatise on demonology. He does not develop a systematic doctrine of evil spirits, does not describe their hierarchy, and does not treat the details of their activity as a separate subject. Demonology in this work is extremely concise: the devil (*ho diabolos*) is explicitly named properly only once — in Heb. 2:14. This, however, is not a marginal note; on the contrary, in this single sentence the author concentrates a key element of soteriology: how the death of Christ deprives the devil of efficacy and liberates people from the bondage of fear of death.

Even the designation of Heb. as *logos tēs paraklēseōs* is important here. "The word of encouragement" does not mean mere gentle consolation. In the biblical and homiletic sense it encompasses both strengthening and admonition, both uplifting and a call to perseverance. The author speaks to a community that had already known suffering, public insults, loss of property and solidarity with prisoners (Heb. 10:32–34), and at the same time was exposed to weariness, spiritual weakening and the temptation to withdraw from the confession. Therefore the demonological thread in Heb. 2:14–15 is not meant to incite curiosity about the devil, but serves the essential purpose of the speech: to strengthen the addressees in fidelity to Christ. The author shows that the fear of death — one of the most powerful mechanisms of human bondage — was struck at its very root by the death, exaltation and priestly intercession of the Son.

The fundamental thesis of the Epistle is christocentric and at the same time antidemoniacal: the devil is not a sovereign "lord of death" on a par with God. His power is parasitic — it feeds on sin, accusation and fear (*phobos thanatou*) in order to imprison people in disobedience, despair, conformity or violence. The Son of God assumed true humanity, entered into "blood and flesh" (*haima kai sarx*), voluntarily tasted death, and by his sacrifice and intercession deprived the devil of his principal instrument. Humans still die, but death has lost the ultimate power to separate from God; it no longer must dictate decisions contrary to faith and love.

Thus understood, demonology is subordinated to soteriology. The author of Heb. does not invite a focus on the adversary but to "look to Jesus" (cf. Heb. 12:2). Precisely for that reason the mention of the devil appears in the context of the incarnation, the Son's brotherhood with humans, the high-priestly sacrifice, and aid to the tempted. The devil is named in order to clarify the scope of Christ's victory; Christ is not an addition to demonology, but demonology is incorporated into the exposition about Christ as Son, High Priest, Mediator and Pioneer of salvation.

1.2 Context of Heb. 1–2: the paradox of humiliation and exaltation

The first two chapters of Heb. form a movement from the Son's majesty to his voluntary humiliation and again toward exaltation. Heb. 1 presents the Son as God's final Word, a participant in creation, the reflection of the Father's glory, the One who "upholds all things by the word of his power," who effectuates the purification of sins and sits at the right hand of Majesty, surpassing the angels. Already in this first

chapter the highest christology is sketched: the Son is not one of the messengers nor one of the heavenly beings, but the One through whom God spoke finally and through whom he achieved the cleansing of sins. In Heb. 2 the same Son is "for a little while" made lower than the angels, takes on the human condition, suffers, "tasted death for everyone," does not hesitate to call people brothers, shares with them "blood and flesh," becomes a merciful and faithful High Priest and comes to the aid of the tempted (Heb. 2:10–18). There is no contradiction here between majesty and humiliation. The author rather exhibits the paradox of revelation: it is precisely the One who is above the angels who can become an effective Savior of humans, because he voluntarily entered below the angels — into the domain of suffering and death.

The rhetorical function of this movement is significant. The addressees may experience their own humiliation, social marginalization and threat as a sign of defeat. The author answers: the Son's way also led through humiliation, but it was not a denial of his dignity. On the contrary, in God's logic suffering accepted in obedience became the path to glory and priestly solidarity. Therefore the community must not interpret suffering automatically as abandonment by God. It must read it in the light of Jesus, who "through suffering" was made perfect as the pioneer of salvation (Heb. 2:10), that is, brought to the fullness of his saving mission as the incarnate Son and High Priest.

Heb. 2:14–15 stands at the very heart of this paradoxical dynamic: the greatness of the Son is revealed not by avoiding death but by entering into it "similarly" (*paraplēsiōs*) to the brothers, that he might "through death" (*dia tou thanatou*) render powerless the one who had "the power of death" (*to kratos tou thanatou*) — that is the devil — and "set free" (*apallaxē*) those who through fear of death had been "subject to bondage" (*enochoi douleias*) their whole lives.

Particular importance attaches to the canonical and literary arrangement of quotations in Heb. 2. The author invokes Ps. 8 to speak about humanity and its destiny to glory, and then applies that psalm christologically to Jesus. He also invokes Isa. 8 to present the Son among the "children" given to him by God. In this way Heb. 2:5–18 is not a loose collection of motifs, but a coherent argument: humanity was created for dominion and glory, yet now we do not yet see the full subjection of all things under humanity; we do, however, see Jesus, who entered human condition, passed through death and was crowned with glory. He is both the fulfillment of humanity's vocation in Ps. 8 and the brotherly Leader of the community in Isa. 8.

1.3 The text of Heb. 2:14–15: structure and translation

The Greek text reads:

Epei oun ta paidia kekoinōnēken haimatos kai sarkos, kai autos paraplēsiōs meteschen tōn autōn, hina dia tou thanatou katargēsē ton to kratos echonta tou thanatou, tout' estin ton diabolon, kai apallaxē toutous, hosoi phobō thanatou dia pantos tou zēn enochoi ēsan douleias.

A literal translation:

"Since therefore the children have shared in blood and flesh, he likewise shared in the same, that through death he might render powerless the one who had the power of death, that is the devil, and set free all those who through fear of death were subject to bondage their whole life."

In the sentence one can distinguish: (1) the human situation ("the children" share in "blood and flesh"); (2) the Son's solidaric action ("he likewise shared"); (3) the means of victory ("through death"); (4) the first goal ("to render the devil powerless"); (5) the second goal ("to free people"); (6) the instrument of bondage ("fear of death"); (7) the scope of bondage ("their whole life").

From the perspective of the rhetoric of the whole Epistle, this sentence is climactic. It is not merely an explanation of the fact of the incarnation. It answers the question why the Son had to enter so deeply into human frailty. The author does not say generally: "the Son became a human to be near people." He says more precisely: the Son shared in blood and flesh in order to be able to die, and through death to break the mechanism of bondage. This means that incarnation, death and priestly exaltation form one salvific line. One cannot separate Bethlehem solidarity from the cross nor the cross from entry into the sanctuary and intercession.

It is worth noting also the double effect of Christ's action. The first effect concerns the devil: he is rendered powerless. The second concerns humans: they are liberated. The author does not stop at the abstract victory over the adversary, but immediately translates it into a new status for humans. Christ's victory is not merely an event "over us" or "outside us"; it is liberation for those who were enslaved by fear. Therefore Heb. 2:14–15 must be read together with later exhortations to boldness, confidence and perseverance: since the objective basis of accusation has been removed, the community may draw near to God, persevere in confession and not retreat to perdition (cf. Heb. 4:16; 10:19–23, 39).

1.4 "The children" and the community of brothers: Isa. 8 in Heb. 2

The designation *ta paidia* ("the children") comes from the quotation of Isa. 8: "Behold me and the children whom the LORD has given me," applied by Heb. to Christ and the redeemed (Heb. 2:13). In this key "brothers" (Heb. 2:11–12) is not a metaphor of benevolence but a theological description of real solidarity: the Son does not save from a distance but enters history and the family of humanity. His victory thus has a representative character (Heb. 2:9: "for all") and a priestly character (Heb. 2:17).

The quotation from Isa. 8 performs in Heb. 2 a function greater than merely decorative. In its Isaianic context the words about children are associated with a sign, trust in God, and the tension between faith and fear in a situation of danger. The author of Heb., without developing the whole history of Isaiah, draws from that text an image of a community entrusted to God. Christ presents himself somewhat among those whom God has given him. He does not stand above them as a detached ruler, but identifies with them as a brother. At the same time he remains the One who leads them to glory.

Heb. 2 exhibits a distinctive juxtaposition: "the one who sanctifies" and "those who are sanctified," "all from one" (Heb. 2:11). The author does not blur the difference between Christ and humans but shows the depth of communion. Christ is the source of sanctification, and at the same time he does not hesitate to call the sanctified his brothers. Precisely therefore he can be an effective High Priest. The priest in Heb. is not a neutral or distant mediator. He is the One who knows the human condition from within, but not by participation in sin, rather by the experience of suffering, temptation, obedience and death.

The motif of "children" also helps to understand that liberation in Heb. is not purely individualistic. The author addresses a community that is to continue not forsaking assemblies, to stimulate one another to love and good works, to remember prisoners and the persecuted (cf. Heb. 10:24–25; 13:1–3). The Son leads not single, isolated individuals but "many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10). Fear of death isolates, forces one to save oneself at any cost and to abandon others. Christ, however, creates a community of brothers and children in which freedom from enslaving fear takes the shape of solidarity.

1.5 "Blood and flesh" — *haima kai sarx*

The phrase *haima kai sarx* ("blood and flesh"), with the ordering inverted from colloquial expectation, accents the dimension of mortality and sacrifice: blood as life exposed to being poured out, flesh as frailty and vulnerability. One should not, however, draw strong conclusions from the mere order — the author does not deprecate matter. "Blood and flesh" is the condition of mortal, wounded, kin humanity; the problem is not corporeality as such, but its present state subject to suffering and death.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews "blood" has particular theological significance. Chapters 9–10 repeatedly speak of blood in the context of covenant, purification and entrance into the sanctuary. The blood of Christ is not presented as an element of an external ritual detached from the person. It is the sign of his life given to God in obedience and love. Thus when Heb. 2:14 speaks of participation in "blood and flesh," the text prepares the later development: the Son could offer himself precisely because he truly took on the human condition.

The emphasis on the reality of "blood and flesh" also functions against any forms of apparent understandings of salvation. If the Son only seemed to be human or only externally assumed a human form, he could not truly die. And if he could not truly die, he could not "through death" render powerless the one who had the power of death. Heb. 2:14 therefore presupposes the full reality of the incarnation and the full reality of Jesus' death. Salvation does not take place beside human frailty but within it, through its assumption and transformation.

1.6 Two verbs of solidarity: *koinōneō* and *metechō*

Heb. uses a distinction significant for the christology of the incarnation:

- The children "have shared" (*kekoinōnēken* — perfect of *koinōneō*): the enduring condition of humanity in "blood and flesh."
- Christ "shared" (*meteschen* — aorist of *metechō*): the historical, once-for-all act of the Son entering the human condition.

The contrast of aspects indicates that the Son is not "eternally found" as human, but takes on humanity in time; he does not "use the body" as a mask, but truly becomes capable of suffering, temptation, bleeding and dying. This full solidarity is completed by Heb. 2:17 ("he was made like his brothers in every respect") and specified by Heb. 4:15 ("except for sin"). Community of nature therefore does not mean participation in personal sin, but the fullness of human condition without blame.

It is worth adding that this difference of verbs should not be treated as an artificial linguistic game. The author of Heb. carefully builds tension between the continuous condition of humans and the saving act of the Son. Humans are immersed in mortality as a state they cannot themselves overcome. The Son, by contrast, enters this state voluntarily. His participation is true, but does not arise from necessity of sin nor from subjection to death as a punishment for his own guilt. Precisely for that reason his death can be representative and liberating.

This distinction also protects against two errors. On the one hand, one must not weaken the reality of Christ's humanity: Heb. speaks of participation in the same, of likeness to brothers, of suffering, temptation, crying and tears. On the other hand, one must not understand Christ as an ordinary human subjected to sin. He is the Son who assumes what humans are by nature in order to do for them what they cannot do for themselves: to enter through death into glory, to offer the perfect sacrifice and to open access to God.

1.7 *Paraplēsiōs* — "similarly"

The adverb *paraplēsiōs* ("similarly, in a like manner") does not suggest mere appearance; it indicates that the Son truly entered the same condition, while remaining the One who enters it voluntarily and with the sovereignty of the Son. Hebrews' christology maintains a tension: true human nature and the unique identity of the Son. Only because he is human can he die; and only because he is the Son does his death have universal, saving efficacy.

The word "similarly" helps to express the mystery without reducing it. Christ shares the human condition, but not in every respect identically. He is like his brothers "in everything" that belongs to true humanity, but without sin. He is subjected to suffering but not enslaved by unbelief. He experiences temptation but is not overcome by it. He truly dies, but his death is not the last word about him. Thus Christ's similarity to people is the basis of his compassion, and his difference as Son is the basis of the efficacy of salvation.

For the rhetoric of the "word of encouragement" this has existential significance. The author can tell the community: Jesus really knows your fragility; he does not look upon it from a distance. He can also say: precisely because he knows it as a Son faithful to the end, he is not only a suffering brother but also a guide and High Priest who leads through what humans cannot pass by themselves.

1.8 "That through death" — the purpose of the incarnation and the logic of the cross

Hina dia tou thanatou ("that through death") reveals the essential purpose of the incarnation: the Son takes on "blood and flesh" in order to be able to truly die. Victory is not the demonstration of "naked omnipotence," but comes "through" solidarity, obedience, suffering, sacrifice, death and exaltation. This is the Paschal logic: God defeats death by death — and by raising the Son "from the dead" (cf. Heb. 13:20).

The author of Heb. does not present Jesus' death as an unfortunate accident or as a failure later rectified by God. Death is written into the salvific purpose of the incarnation. This does not mean that death as such becomes good. Death remains an enemy, a sign of creation's fragility and a consequence of sin in the biblical order. Yet the Son enters it in such a way as to transform its meaning for believers. What was a means of intimidation becomes a place of obedience; what was to close humanity off from God becomes a passage to glory.

In this sense Heb. 2:14–15 should be read together with Heb. 5:7–10. Jesus prays "with loud cries and tears" to the One who could deliver him from death, and is heard. The text does not require understanding this hearing as a simple avoidance of dying. The whole theology of Heb. rather indicates a bringing through death to imperishable life. The Son does not avoid the human lot but opens a way within it. This perspective is especially important for a community threatened by suffering: Christian hope does not consist in a guarantee of avoiding every pain, but in the certainty that suffering and death cannot separate from the goal to which Christ leads.

1.9 *Katargeō* — to render powerless, not to annihilate

The verb *katargeō* means "to make ineffective, nullify, deprive of influence, abolish dominion." It does not speak of an ontological annihilation of the devil, but of breaking his efficacy with respect to those whom Christ has redeemed. This "disarming" occurs not by magical force but through incarnation, sacrificial

death and the Son's high-priestly intercession.[1]

This distinction is necessary to avoid oversimplification. If Heb. 2:14 were to speak of the total removal of the devil from reality, it would be difficult to reconcile with the continued experience of temptation, persecution, unfaithfulness and the need for perseverance. The author of Heb. knows that the community still must struggle for faithfulness, may still succumb to hardness of heart, and is still on the way. "Rendering powerless" thus means that the adversary has lost the decisive instrument against those who hold to Christ: he can no longer effectively use guilt as an irrevocable accusation nor death as the ultimate closure of the way to God.

In a juridical and priestly dimension *katargeō* is connected with the removal of the basis of a claim. The accuser is dangerous where guilt remains uncleansed and conscience remains under the weight of a debt the person cannot pay. Heb. 9–10 answers: Christ has offered the sacrifice once for all, cleansed the conscience and sat down at God's right hand. In this light the devil is not presented as an equal opponent of God but as an usurper whose efficacy depended on sin, fear and accusation. When these are disarmed, his power loses its foundation.

1.10 *Kratos tou thanatou* — "the power of death"

Kratos denotes causal force, a dominating power of action, more an "effective power" than legitimate *exousia*. The phrase "the one who has the power of death" does not grant the devil the competence to decide who and when shall die; God remains the Creator, Judge of all (Heb. 12:23), the One who "brought from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20) and to whom "vengeance belongs" (Heb. 10:30). "The power of death" rather describes the ability to exploit death — as a threat, accusation and source of coercion — to entangle people in bondage.

The author of Heb. preserves a very clear theocentrism. God is the One who speaks, judges, sanctifies, leads, disciplines as a Father, receives the Son's offering and raises him from the dead. The devil is therefore not ruler of an independent realm of death. If he has "the power of death," it is in a derivative and parasitic sense: he can make use of death as a tool of terror, and of human fear as an instrument of bondage. He did not create death as a sovereign demiurge and does not dispose of it like an owner. Yet he exploits the fact of mortality and the consciousness of guilt in order to close a person in the logic of survival, flight from God or despair.

Here it is important to distinguish biological death from death understood theologically as a state of estrangement, accusation and judgment. Heb. does not deny believers' biological mortality. On the contrary, it states soberly: "it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Christ's victory does not consist in Christians ceasing to undergo death. It consists in that death no longer has the final word over their relationship with God. It is no longer the place of definitive triumph of accusation, because the Son entered the sanctuary and lives to intercede.

1.11 *Diabolos* — adversary and accuser

The word *diabolos* (from *diaballō*: "to accuse, slander, break bonds") reveals the mechanism of action: the adversary couples fear of death with accusation of conscience ("you are guilty, there is no forgiveness") to induce apostasy, falsehood and violence. The power of the accuser endures as long as guilt is not actually

[1] Cf. Abeneazer G. Urga, "The victorious high priest in the African context: Christ and the logic of atonement in Hebrews 2:14–18", Stellenbosch Theological Journal 10, no. 1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2024.v10n1.8.

removed. Hence the core of Christ's victory in Heb. takes the shape of a high-priestly sacrifice and the cleansing of conscience (Heb. 9:14; 10:22).

Nevertheless precision must be maintained. The Epistle to the Hebrews does not explicitly develop a full courtroom scene of the devil's accusation as we find in other places of the biblical canon. In speaking of the "accuser" we interpret the meaning of the name *diabolos* and link it with themes of conscience, guilt and cleansing present in Heb. 9–10. This is a theologically justified interpretation, but it should remain rooted in the text: the author's primary concern is that Christ's sacrifice removes sin and cleanses conscience, and thereby deprives the adversary of the ability to use guilt as an instrument of bondage.

From a spiritual perspective the accusation often works not as a simple reminder of moral truth but as a distortion of the relation to God. A conscience cleansed by Christ does not mean lack of responsibility nor trivialization of sin. It rather means that sin is no longer the ultimate definition of a person if one approaches God through the Son. Diabolical accusation paralyzes: "you have no access, no forgiveness, no hope." The priestly work of Christ says the opposite: "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus" (cf. Heb. 10:19). Freedom from accusation is therefore not self-justification but the fruit of the received sacrifice.

1.12 *Apallassō* — to liberate from the yoke of fear

Apallaxē ("to set free, to release") carries a socio-legal shade: it concerns a change of status — the passage from a state of dependence (*douleia*) to the freedom of children. It is not merely an improvement of mood; it is objective justification and cleansing ("a new status before God"), and with it internal freedom from accusation and coercion, access to God's presence (Heb. 4:16) and the hope of a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35).

In Heb. freedom is not conceived as autonomy detached from God. It is freedom to approach, persevere, love and sacrifice. A person freed from enslaving fear does not become someone who feels no fear at a psychological level. They become someone whom fear no longer possesses as lord. They may still tremble before pain, loss and death, but they do not have to betray conscience or abandon Christ in order to save biological life at all costs.

This is why Heb. 2:15 prepares later calls to courage. In Heb. 10:34 the addressees were able to accept with joy the plundering of their goods because they knew they had better and enduring possessions. This does not mean that loss ceased to be a loss. It means that it was no longer absolute. Liberation from *douleia* of fear involves shifting the center of life: from self-preservation to fidelity to God who has promised an indestructible inheritance.

1.13 *Phobos thanatou* — fear of death and its layers

"Fear of death" concerns many levels: the natural instinct for preservation of life; fear of pain and loss of control; existential dread of dissolution of relationships; moral anxiety about reckoning; and fear of judgment (Heb. 9:27). In the context of persecution of the addressees (Heb. 10:32–34; 12:4) this fear is an instrument of coercion: the threat of losing property, freedom, life can incline one to abandon confession. Heb. shows how that fear can "organize a whole life" — generating greed, conformity, idolatry of "security," preemptive violence — and how Christ breaks that circle.

The phrase "their whole life" is especially penetrating. The author does not speak only of fear felt at the moment of dying. He speaks of a power that can shape an entire existence. A person may take decisions,

build relationships, accumulate goods, avoid truth and renounce good under the dictate of fear of losing life, position, security or control. Death then operates by anticipation: though it has not yet come biologically, it already rules through fear.

In Heb. fear of death also has a communal dimension. If a community fears persecution, it may begin to forsake assemblies, weaken confession, avoid solidarity with prisoners, choose religious anonymity. Therefore the author so strongly links Christology with parenesis. It is not enough to know that Jesus died and was exalted. One must allow that truth to transform the community's practices: mutual admonition, perseverance in assembly, sharing the fate of the suffering, going "outside the camp" to bear the reproach of Christ.

At the same time it must be said very clearly: Heb. does not shame a person for the mere experience of fear. Fear may be a natural reaction of a creature, bodily and aware of fragility. Jesus himself prayed "with loud cries and tears" (Heb. 5:7). Liberation therefore does not mean emotional insensitivity or psychological untroubledness. It means that the ultimate Lord of life is not death but God who raised Jesus from the dead.

1.14 In what sense did the devil have "the power of death"?

Heb. does not attribute to the devil sovereignty over life and death. The opponent's power is:

- Initiating sin, the consequence of which is death (cf. the sapiential strand of Judaism: Wis. 2:23–24).
- Accusatory: linking death with irreversible condemnation until guilt is actually removed.
- Intimidating: exploiting *phobos thanatou* to coerce unfaithfulness, compromise and violence.
- Systemic: feeding on a "culture of death" — fear, domination and idolatry of violence.

In each of these dimensions the devil's power is parasitic: he does not create his own "world" but perverts goodness, feeds on guilt and fear, falsifies the meaning of death and suggests that "beyond the grave there is no God or hope."

The initiating dimension must be understood cautiously and canonically. Heb. itself does not elaborate the narrative of the origin of sin nor build an anthropology directly on Genesis. However, in the light of the broader biblical tradition one can say that the devil is the adversary who leads a person to distrust God, and sin opens the space of death as rupture and judgment. This does not transfer moral responsibility from the human to the devil. Heb. repeatedly treats the addressees' decisions as genuinely responsible: it warns against hardness of heart, unbelief, apostasy and neglect of grace.

The accusatory dimension is closely connected with conscience. If a person knows they are guilty and yet does not know effective cleansing, they can be trapped between fear of judgment and flight from God. Heb. responds not by trivializing guilt but by pointing to the perfect sacrifice. Christ does not say: "sin does not matter," but: "sin has been expiated by the one sacrifice once for all." This is what removes the accuser's argument.

The intimidating dimension is particularly visible in the community's situation. Whoever fears death or social elimination may be coerced into renouncing confession. The author of Heb. does not minimize this pressure. On the contrary, he describes it realistically. But he also shows that Christ, who went through death, opened a horizon beyond mere temporal survival.

1.15 Soteriology of Heb. 2:14–18: unity of Christus Victor and sacrifice

Heb. 2:14–18 combines victory over the adversary (*Christus Victor*) with the high-priestly sacrifice and the cleansing of conscience:

- "He tasted death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9): representative death.
- "He became merciful and faithful high priest to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17): the high-priestly function.
- "By his own blood" (Heb. 9:12): a gift of himself, not an external offering.
- "Cleanses conscience" (Heb. 9:14; 10:22): neutralizes the accuser's weapon.
- "Removes sin" (Heb. 9:26): death loses the status of an "inescapable retribution" leading to condemnation.
- "Sat down at the right hand" (Heb. 10:12): the offering accepted, victory manifest.
- "Always lives to intercede" (Heb. 7:25): an indestructible priesthood.

Therefore victory is not "beside" expiation but "through" expiation.[1] The devil loses efficacy when the chain sin → accusation → fear → bondage → death-as-condemnation is interrupted in Christ's sacrifice and intercession.

This is one of the most important features of Hebrews' theology. In some simplified accounts the victory over the devil and the sacrifice for sins are sometimes separated, as if they were two competing metaphors of salvation. The Epistle to the Hebrews does not permit such a rupture. Christ conquers because he offers himself. He disarms the adversary because he removes sin. He liberates from fear because he opens access to God. His royal victory takes the form of a priestly sacrifice, and his priestly sacrifice reveals the Son's victorious power.

Heb. 2:17 is a bridge here: the Son became like his brothers "to become merciful and faithful High Priest in things relating to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Without this verse Heb. 2:14–15 could be read too militarily, as a simple scene of vanquishing an opponent. With this verse one sees that the "defeat" of the devil takes place through the priestly solution to the problem of sin. The adversary is rendered powerless not because God strikes a bargain with him, but because the Son as High Priest truly accomplishes what human conscience required: he purifies, unites, and opens the way to God.

1.16 Not a "ransom" to Satan, but an offering to God

Heb. nowhere suggests a transaction with the devil. The Son's offering is made to God — in obedience, in the heavenly sanctuary — for the cleansing of sins and conscience (Heb. 9–10). "Ransom" language of liberation may be used metaphorically, not as a description of a commercial exchange with the adversary. The devil receives nothing; he is exposed as an usurper when God publicly reveals the value of the offering and the Son's exaltation.

In Heb. the emphasis falls on the Son's "entry" into the sanctuary, "through his own blood," "once for all," obtaining eternal redemption (cf. Heb. 9:11–12). The direction of this action is theological: the Son stands before God as High Priest. There is no scene of negotiation with the devil nor any suggestion that the adversary had a right to humans that God would have to buy off by payment. If one speaks of liberation, it is in the sense of release from the bondage of fear and accusation, not in the sense of settling a debt with Satan.

This precision is important pastorally and dogmatically. If the devil were the recipient of the offering, he would acquire the status of a subject with a legitimate claim on humans. Heb. consistently avoids that.

Final matters are decided before God: God speaks, God judges, God accepts the Son, God gives access to the sanctuary. The devil is an adversary and accuser but not a party to covenant nor owner of people.

1.17 "We do not yet see… We see Jesus": the already/not yet tension

If Christ "rendered the devil powerless," why do we die? Heb. preserves the tension:

- Already: the accomplished cleansing from sins (1:3); the Son's entry into the sanctuary (9:11–12); believers' access to the throne of grace (4:16); enduring intercession (7:25); the exposure of death's impotence in Jesus' resurrection (2:9; 13:20).
- Not yet: we are still mortal (9:27); we still experience persecution (10:32–34); "we do not yet see" all things subjected to him (2:8).

The key is Heb. 2:8–9: "But now we do not yet see everything subjected to him. We do see Jesus…" — the first of the children who was brought to glory through suffering, the Pioneer (*archēgos*) who leads many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

This passage is fundamental for Hebrews' eschatology. The author does not deny the world's experience. He does not say: "since Christ has won, everything already appears subjected to God." On the contrary, he recognizes that "we do not yet see" full subjection. The community still sees suffering, sin, death, social pressure and their own weakness. Yet faith does not consist in denying what is visible but in directing the gaze to Jesus, in whom the future fate of humanity has already been inaugurated.

This already/not-yet tension protects against two extremes. The first would be triumphalism, which claims that Christians should no longer experience fear, suffering or death in any real way. Heb. contradicts this: the addressees suffer, must endure, and biological death remains a fact. The second extreme would be despair, as if Christ's victory were merely a promise without present effects. Heb. also contradicts that: cleansing has already occurred; access to God is already opened; the High Priest already lives and intercedes; and the community can already approach with confidence.

It is precisely in this eschatological tension that the liberation of Heb. 2:15 must be understood. Christ has not yet removed from believers' experience all mortality. But he has removed its tyranny as the ultimate lord. The full transformation of mortality belongs to the fulfillment of the promises, but already now the community lives by the power of the Son's victory.

1.18 A sympathizing High Priest: Heb. 4:14–16

Heb. 4:14–16 develops the consequences: we have "a great High Priest" who "sympathizes with our weaknesses," "having been tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin," and therefore we may "with confidence" draw near to the throne of grace. This is not a psychological promise of "absence of fear" but a relational assurance: in fear we are not alone, and fear ceases to issue the final commands. Precisely for that reason Heb. 5:7, without idealization, describes Jesus' prayer "with loud cries and tears": he was heard, not by bypassing death but by being brought through it.

The High Priest's sympathy in Heb. is tightly connected with his experience. Christ does not sympathize from without, like someone who theoretically knows what human suffering is. He experienced weakness, temptation, abandonment and death, but without sin. Thus his sympathy is not indulgence toward evil but a mercy capable of real help. Heb. 2:18 says: "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted." This help does not consist in a simple removal of every trial but in granting access to grace in time of need.

The “throne of grace” is the opposite of the tribunal of accusation. A person burdened by guilt and fear expects rejection. The author of Heb. says: thanks to the High Priest one may draw near with confidence. This is not reckless confidence nor confidence based on one’s own innocence. It is confidence rooted in Christ’s blood, in his priesthood and in his compassion. Thus Heb. 4:14–16 develops the practical dimension of Heb. 2:14–15: liberated from the bondage of fear, people do not flee from God but approach him.

1.19 Heb. 9–10: an effective sacrifice, a cleansed conscience

Chapters 9–10 constitute the theological matrix for 2:14–15. Christ enters “through the greater and more perfect tent,” “by his own blood,” “once for all” (Heb. 9:11–12), cleanses the conscience “from dead works” (Heb. 9:14), removes sin “once for all by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26), “sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12), and “those who have been sanctified once for all” no longer carry within them the consciousness of an unpayable debt (Heb. 10:2). It is precisely this cleansing of conscience that robs the accuser of the basis for his claim.

Cleansing of conscience is more than subjective relief. In Heb. conscience is not healed by autosuggestion nor by forgetting guilt, but by Christ’s objective action. The author contrasts the repetitiveness of old sacrifices with the once-for-all efficacy of the Son’s offering. Repetition of ritual kept bringing sins to mind; Christ’s offering removes sin definitively. Therefore believers may have “hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience” and approach God (cf. Heb. 10:22).

The relation among cleansing of conscience, entrance into the sanctuary and freedom from accusation is key. Christ did not only die on earth; as risen and exalted High Priest he entered God’s reality. His offering is not an event confined to the past but has a lasting effect in his presence before God. Heb. 7:25 will say that he is able to save forever those who draw near to God through him, because he always lives to intercede. This means that freedom from accusation is not merely the memory of a past act but participation in the living intercession of the Son.

Entry into the sanctuary also has an ecclesial dimension. Heb. 10:19–25 moves from the theology of the offering to exhortation: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,” let us hold fast to confession, consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, and not neglect to meet together. A cleansed conscience produces communal perseverance. A person freed from accusation need not hide from God nor isolate from brothers. They can live in truth because access to God has been opened not by personal merit but by Christ.

At this point it is especially clear that Hebrews’ demonology is subordinated to a priestly soteriology. The devil loses efficacy because Christ cleanses conscience, opens the sanctuary and intercedes for his own. When conscience is cleansed, the accusation has no ultimate power. When access to God is open, fear of rejection is overcome. When the Son lives as High Priest, death cannot close the way to the Father.

1.20 Heb. 12–13: perseverance, discipline, the city to come

In the parenetic section (12–13) the author translates theology into practice: the addressees “have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood” (Heb. 12:4), but they must “endure” under God’s fatherly discipline, remembering that the ultimate “city” is still to come (Heb. 13:14). It is precisely in this context that the words are spoken about the “God of peace” who “brought back from the dead the great shepherd of the

sheep" (Heb. 13:20). The Shepherd has triumphed over death; hence the community need not fear it in a slavish sense.

Heb. 12:1–3 is one of the most important rhetorical high points of the whole homily. After the great panorama of faith in Heb. 11 the author urges: let us lay aside every weight and sin, run with endurance the race set before us, "looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of our faith." Jesus endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and sat down at God's throne. In this brief summons the main lines of the Epistle converge: faith, endurance, suffering, shame, exaltation and the gaze fixed on Christ.

The connection among Heb. 10:32–39, Heb. 11 and Heb. 12:1–3 is very tight. In Heb. 10 the author reminds the addressees of their earlier endurance: they endured sufferings, faced insults, became companions of those persecuted, shared misfortune with prisoners and accepted the plundering of their goods. He then calls them not to abandon confidence because perseverance is needed. The final citations and allusions lead to the contrast: "we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul" (cf. Heb. 10:39). Heb. 11 answers what such faith is: it is perseverance by the promise not yet seen in full. Heb. 12 then shows the center of that faith: Jesus, who went the way of the cross and sat down at God's right hand.

In this light the fear of death in Heb. 2:15 is not an isolated theme. It returns as a pressure that can move the community to retreat. Heb. 11 recalls witnesses who by faith made decisions unintelligible from the standpoint of mere survival. Some experienced deliverance; others suffered, refusing deliverance in order to obtain a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35). Faith does not always mean deliverance from death; it means salvation of hope beyond death. Heb. 12:1–3 indicates that the most complete witness and source of this faith is Jesus himself.

"Looking to Jesus" is thus not a pious addendum to the argument. It is the rhetorical and spiritual center of the "word of encouragement." The community must stop looking to death as the ultimate fact and must see Jesus as the One who passed through death into glory. It must stop interpreting shame as evidence of defeat and see that Jesus "despising the shame" reached the throne. It must stop absolutizing its own fatigue and "consider him who endured such hostility from sinners," so as not to give up, broken in spirit.

1.21 Paschal and Exodus typology: *archēgos* and liberation

Heb. 2–3 weaves paschal and exodus motifs: a people in bondage, a leader (*archēgos*) leading to glory, comparison of the Son with Moses, the way to rest, and the threat of turning back "in the wilderness." In this key Jesus' death appears as a Passover and a new Exodus: the crossing through the "sea" of death, the disarming of the adversary, the leading out of the slaves of fear into the freedom of sons.[2] Interpretations that go further — e.g., on a direct *descensus ad inferos* embedded in Heb. 2:14–15 — remain debated; exegetical caution requires not to pronounce beyond what the text gives.[2]

The word *archēgos* in Heb. 2:10, rendered "pioneer," "author" or "leader," has great significance for the Epistle's theological imagination. Christ not only gives an example from the outside but opens the road which he leads others to follow. He is the first who passed through suffering and death into glory in a definitive way, and his passage becomes the path for "many sons." In this sense the liberation of Heb. 2:15 is not only liberation from something, but also an introduction into somewhere: into glory, rest, the city to come, the assembly around the living God.

[2]K. Marcar, "Passover, Liberation, and the Defeat of Death and the Devil in Hebrews" (work indicated in the material).

The comparison with Moses in Heb. 3 emphasizes both continuity and surpassing. Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house; Christ is faithful as Son over the house. The community is on the way and must hear God's voice "today" so as not to replicate the wilderness' unbelief. Fear of death can work like nostalgia for Egypt: better to return to known bondage than to go toward the promise through uncertainty. The author of Heb. answers: Christ as *archēgos* has gone before us; turning back would be not only psychological weakness but rejection of the way opened by the Son.

The Paschal and Exodus typology should remain rooted in the text and not be freely expanded. Heb. does not narrate all elements of paschal symbolism in detail nor provide a narrative description of Christ's descent into the abyss in Heb. 2:14–15. One may speak of a paschal logic of passage and liberation because the text speaks of bondage, death, blood, a leader and the way to glory. One should not, however, add details which the author does not supply.

1.22 Freedom from the tyranny of death and love purified from fear

Fear of death can organize an entire life: leading to hoarding goods, idolatry of control, preemptive violence, conformity, despair. The liberation about which Heb. speaks is the ability to persevere in truth and love even when loss threatens: martyrdom, sharing goods, solidarity with prisoners (Heb. 10:34), serving the sick and dying, the courage to speak truth in spite of danger. A person ceases to make biological life an absolute value — because their life is "hidden" with the faithful God who raised Jesus and promised a "better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35).

Christian freedom in Heb. therefore has a deeply practical dimension. If death is no longer lord, one can use goods, time, relationships and one's own safety differently. One can visit prisoners even though it risks social compromise. One can share the fate of the suffering though it would be easier to cut oneself off. One can not abandon assemblies though open belonging to the community may expose one to loss. One can go "outside the camp," bearing the reproach of Christ, because "we have no lasting city here, but we seek the city that is to come" (cf. Heb. 13:13–14).

This does not entail contempt for biological life. Christianity does not make death itself a good nor encourage reckless endangerment of oneself or others. Heb. rather teaches proper hierarchy: temporal life is a good but not an absolute good. The absolute is fidelity to the living God. Liberation from fear of death means that one no longer has to sacrifice truth, conscience and love on the altar of survival.

Such freedom is "purified from fear" not because it knows no trembling but because it does not arise from compulsion. Enslaved love loves only when safe. Love liberated by Christ can endure even when safety is violated. It is precisely here that the victory over the devil becomes visible in communal life: not in spectacular fascination with evil, but in patient faithfulness, forgiveness, solidarity and courage.

1.23 Pastoral implications and limits of reasoning

- Heb. 2:14–15 does not constitute a catalogue of demonology nor a manual of exorcisms. It teaches that the principal instruments of the adversary are sin, accusation and fear — and that the basic means of liberation is Christ's work: his sacrifice, intercession and the cleansing of conscience.
- One must not present every suffering or psychological symptom as proof of demonic action. Fear of death has biological, psychological, existential and moral components. In accompanying persons with intense fear, bereavement or crisis of conscience one should combine wise pastoral care with competent medical and psychological help.

- Heb. does not shame believers who experience fear. Jesus himself prayed "with cries and tears" (Heb. 5:7). The point is that fear should not be "lord" of life. Sources of strengthening are prayer, the sacrament of reconciliation, the Eucharist, the Word, the community, drawing near "with confidence" to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16) and remembrance of the intercession of the living High Priest (Heb. 7:25).
- In communal life the space of liberation is created by concrete practices: mutual care, not forsaking assemblies (Heb. 10:25), brotherly love, compassion for prisoners and the oppressed (Heb. 13:1–3), readiness to "go out to him outside the camp, bearing his reproach" (Heb. 13:13).

These implications require particular caution. The theological description of liberation from fear of death does not authorize hasty judgments about others' experiences, mental state or health. The fact that Heb. speaks of the devil exploiting fear does not mean that every fear is direct evidence of demonic action. Fear may have many causes: bodily, psychological, social, spiritual and moral. Pastoral discernment cannot replace medical or psychological diagnosis, and religious language should not stigmatize those who suffer. Equally important is not to shift moral responsibility for human choices onto the devil. Heb. warns real people about real decisions: about unbelief, hardening of heart, abandonment of trust and rejection of grace. The devil may tempt, accuse and intimidate, but the human remains responsible for the response of faith. Liberation in Christ does not abolish responsibility; on the contrary, it enables it in freedom, because a person is no longer condemned to act under the dictation of enslaving fear.

In pastoral care the central focus should remain what is central in Heb.: Christ. Persons struggling with fear, guilt or the experience of mortality need above all to be led to the High Priest who sympathizes, cleanses conscience and opens access to God. Pastoral help should avoid both the reductionism that reduces everything to psychology and the religious abuse that interprets every crisis demonologically. Heb. teaches a more integral way: the truth about Christ embraces body, conscience, community, hope and the final destiny of humanity.

1.24 "What the text does not say?" — clarifying limits

- Heb. 2:14 does not teach that the devil created death nor that he autonomously decides about people's deaths; ultimate authority over life, judgment and resurrection belongs to God (Heb. 10:30; 12:23; 13:20).
- The text does not speak of annihilation of the devil, but of rendering him ineffective (*katargeō*) with respect to the work of salvation.
- It does not promise biological immortality for believers (Heb. 9:27), nor the total removal of subjective psychological fear; it promises freedom from its tyranny.
- It does not speak of a "ransom" paid to the devil; Christ's offering is presented as made to God and removes the basis of accusation.
- It does not provide a map of "cosmic territories" nor a catalogue of "rituals of combat"; it concentrates attention on Christ, his sacrifice and intercession.

Clarifying these limits is part of honest exegesis. A biblical text should be read with full seriousness, but one must not force it to answer questions it does not raise. Heb. 2:14–15 says a great deal about death, fear, the devil and liberation, but it does so within the framework of christology and soteriology. It does not yield a speculative detailed demonology. It does not explain all the relations between suffering, illness, psyche and spiritual evil. Nor does it authorize the assumption that a Christian should automatically experience total emotional steadiness in the face of death.

On the other hand one must not weaken the text's radicalism. The author indeed speaks of liberation. This is not mere consolation in metaphor. If Christ has cleansed conscience, entered the sanctuary, sat at the right hand and lives to intercede, then the status of believers has truly changed. They can draw near to God with confidence, persevere in confession, and view death in the light of promise. Limits of interpretation do not diminish the text's power; they only help to grasp it in its proper place.

1.25 Theological synthesis of Heb. 2:14–15

Heb. 2:14–15 summarizes the paradox and power of the Gospel: God conquers death through death. The Son of God assumes "blood and flesh," enters "similarly" into our condition, that "through death" he might take away the devil's "power of death" and "set free" the enslaved by fear. The devil's authority was not sovereign; it preyed on sin, accusation and fear. Christ conquers as High Priest: he offers himself in sacrifice, cleanses conscience, opens access to God, passes into imperishable life and continually intercedes for his brothers. Hence the Christian may legitimately fear pain and the process of dying — but no longer must save temporal life at the cost of truth, love and fidelity. Death remains an enemy, but it is not lord; the devil remains an adversary, but he is no longer owner; Christ remains the living High Priest who brings his brothers through death to glory.

Within the broader structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews this synthesis is developed as a "word of encouragement" addressed to a community on the way. Ps. 8 allows the author to speak of humanity's destiny to glory and dominion, which we do not yet fully see. Isa. 8 allows him to present Christ among the children entrusted to him by God. Heb. 2:5–18 joins these two strands: Jesus is the fulfillment of humanity's vocation and a brother who shares blood and flesh in order that through death he might open the way to glory. Heb. 9–10 explains how that victory becomes effective with respect to guilt: by the once-for-all offering, the cleansing of conscience, entrance into the sanctuary and durable intercession. Heb. 10:32–39; 11; 12:1–3 show how this theology becomes perseverance: a community that remembers former courage, learns faith from witnesses and looks to Jesus can refuse to retreat in the face of death's pressure.

The eschatological dimension remains decisive. Christ's victory is "already" accomplished: the Son died, was crowned with glory, sat at the right hand, opened the sanctuary and lives as High Priest. But the full transformation of human mortality is "not yet" visible in all creation. Believers still die, suffer and struggle with fear. Yet they already live in a new reality: death is not the ultimate lord, accusation has not the final word, and access to God has been opened. Understood thus, liberation does not negate human frailty; it transforms its horizon.

1.26 Notes

1.27 Conclusion

Heb. 2:14–15 gives the Church a compact and penetrating hermeneutic of fear, sin and death and their overcoming in Christ. The text is not intended to stimulate fascination with demons nor to trivialize human suffering, but to direct the gaze to the Person of the Son: incarnate, crucified, risen, exalted and interceding High Priest. A community that "sees Jesus" (Heb. 2:9) by the eyes of faith and "looks to Jesus" as leader and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2) finds the courage to endure, to sympathize and to love in a world where death still operates biologically but has lost the status of final lord.

The Hebrews' "word of encouragement" therefore remains current: let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:16), hold fast the confession without wavering (Heb. 10:23), remembering that

the God of peace has already brought back from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20). In this paschal perspective fear of death yields to hope and accusation to a cleansed conscience; Christian life becomes the freedom to love, even to the point of self-giving.

This freedom is not triumphalistic nor detached from human fragility. It is the freedom of children led by the Son who does not hesitate to call them brothers. It is the freedom of a conscience cleansed not by forgetting guilt but by the blood of Christ. It is the freedom of a community that does not yet see the full subjection of all things but already sees Jesus crowned with glory. Therefore Heb. 2:14–15 does not lock Christians into fear of the devil but opens them to trust in God: the adversary has been deprived of decisive efficacy, death has been deprived of the last word, and the living High Priest intercedes for those he leads to glory.

1.28 Bibliography

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2 Glossary of Greek Terms

apallassō – **apallassō**: to release from the yoke of bondage
archēgos – **archēgos**: leader or pioneer who brings many to glory
diabolos – **diabolos**: the adversary and accuser
haima kai sarx – **haima kai sarx**: "blood and flesh": the concrete, mortal human condition
katargeō – **katargeō**: to render ineffective rather than to annihilate ontologically
koinoneō – **koinoneō**: lasting participation or communion of sharing
kratos – **kratos**: effective power in action, not independent sovereignty
metechō – **metechō**: the Son's participation in the human condition through the incarnation
paraplēsiōs – **paraplēsiōs**: "likewise": Christ's real solidarity with humanity
phobos thanatou – **phobos thanatou**: fear of death as a mechanism of enslavement