1 Jesus's Battle with Satan and Evil Spirits as an Essential Element of the Reign of God

1.1 Abstract

In the Gospels, Jesus's battle with Satan and evil spirits is not an episodic appendage to the teaching on the kingdom of God. It is rather one of the privileged loci in which the reign of God becomes visible and effective. The temptation in the wilderness, the expulsion of unclean spirits, the Beelzebul controversy, the sending of the disciples, the healings attributed to Satan's activity, and the announcements of victory in the passion and resurrection together form a coherent, if polyphonic, narrative. God reveals his authority not by establishing an empire equal and opposite to evil, but through the liberating action of the Son in the Holy Spirit. Jesus's authority over the spirits is a sign that the "strong man" has already been bound, though the full removal of evil remains the object of eschatological hope.

This study defends two theses. First, Jesus's exorcisms must be interpreted primarily in christological and eschatological terms: they reveal the arrival of God's reign in the person and mission of Jesus. Second, their meaning must not be reduced either to a pre-modern description of illness or to sensationalist demonology. The Gospels distinguish illness from possession, while at the same time presenting evil as a personal, social, and spiritual reality that destroys the human person's relationship with God, with other persons, and with their own life. Christ's victory over Satan reaches its culmination in the Paschal mystery: the cross and resurrection do not annul the earlier exorcisms but disclose their ultimate meaning.

1.2 1. The Hermeneutical Problem: How to Read the Narratives about Evil Spirits?

The contemporary reader approaches the texts about demons with two opposing interpretive temptations. The first consists in their automatic dismissal as an outdated idiom that in reality describes nothing more than medical or psychological disorders unknown to the ancients. The second reduces them to an uncritical transposition of every Gospel scene onto contemporary situations, as though every form of suffering—especially mental suffering—were to be explained by the direct activity of spirits. Neither posture is faithful to the literary and theological particularity of the text.

The Gospels are capable of distinguishing various forms of human suffering. In his programmatic summary of Jesus's activity, Matthew lists separately those who were sick with various diseases, those who were suffering, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics (Matt 4:24). This does not mean that ancient clinical categories are identical with modern ones, but it does exclude the simple claim that for the evangelists every illness was possession. Equally significant is the fact that the narratives about unclean spirits have their own distinctive features: the spirit recognizes Jesus, speaks, resists his mission, submits to his command, and departs. These are not merely accounts of the etiology of ailments, but stories about a conflict of authority and about the restoration of human freedom. [1]

Historical exegesis therefore has an obligation to hear these texts within the world of Second Temple Judaism, in which various conceptions existed regarding angels, spirits hostile to humanity, temptation, and cosmic conflict. This was not, however, a dualism of two equal gods. The biblical narrative preserves the absolute sovereignty of the Creator: spiritual evil is a real adversary, but not a counter-god. Work on the text also requires distinguishing between what can be investigated by historical methods—language,

genre, religious milieu, and the function of the narrative—and what constitutes the Church's confession of faith in the definitive victory of Christ.

Scholarship has noted that Jesus's activity as an exorcist was a recognizable element of his public mission and that the dispute over the source of this authority constituted one of the central points of conflict with his opponents. Amanda Witmer demonstrates, moreover, that the social accusation of a healer being possessed could serve to discredit him; it is precisely for this reason that the accusation of acting by the power of Beelzebul is not a minor misunderstanding but strikes at the very meaning of Jesus's mission. [2] Richard H. Hiers aptly observes that modern discomfort with demonological language has at times led to the marginalization of one of the most characteristic features of Jesus's activity in the Synoptic tradition. [3]

> "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Matt 12:28).
> "But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). [4]

These two sentences are the axis of the entire exegesis. They do not say that the kingdom of God will only come at some future point after evil has been removed, but that in Jesus's effective action it has already "come" or "overtaken" his hearers. The Greek verb *phthanō* in Luke 11:20 expresses not an abstract possibility but an anticipatory, real arrival. The reign of God is not here a place to which one flees, nor merely an interior disposition. It is the effective, saving authority of God, which enters into a situation of bondage and shatters it. [4]

1.3 2. The Kingdom of God: A Liberating Reign, Not a Neutral Religious Idea

The expression "kingdom of God" (*basileia tou theou*) denotes above all the dynamic reign of God, not a territory with borders. In Jesus's proclamation it is near, coming, hidden like a seed, and at the same time present in the signs of mercy, forgiveness, healing, and the gathering of disciples. Mark places at the beginning of the public ministry a programmatic declaration: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The account of the exorcism in the synagogue that immediately follows is not a random illustration of miracle-working; it is the first narrative development of this announcement. [1]

The use of the category of reign cannot be detached from the biblical image of God as king, who leads his people out of bondage, judges injustice, and renews the covenant. In this sense, an exorcism is a theological act: it reveals that human life is not left under the violence of a hostile power. It is not, however, a demonstration of magical technique. In the Synoptic narratives Jesus does not employ incantations, elaborate rituals, or invocations of a higher name to mediate between himself and the spirit. He acts with *exousia*—an authority that is recognized by the spirits, astonishes the witnesses, and is interpreted as the action of the Spirit or the "finger" of God. Graham H. Twelftree emphasizes that it is precisely the connection between exorcisms and the coming of the kingdom that distinguishes Jesus's claim from known exorcistic practices. [5]

Dimension of God's Reign	Gospel Text	Significance of the Battle with the Unclean Spirit
Inauguration of the time of salvation	Mark 1:14–28	After proclaiming the nearness of the kingdom, Jesus liberates a man in the synagogue.
Authority of God's Spirit	Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20	The exorcism is a sign of God's action, not of a competing religious power.
Defeat of the "strong man"	Mark 3:23–27; Matt 12:29; Luke 11:21–22	Jesus enters the adversary's "house" and takes back what he had enslaved.
Extension of the mission	Mark 3:14–15; Luke 9:1–2; 10:17–20	The disciples participate in Jesus's mission, but its source remains his name and authority.
Paschal culmination	John 12:31–33; Col 2:15; Heb 2:14–15	Victory over the "ruler of this world," death, and hostile powers is revealed in the cross and resurrection.

The *basileia* understood in this way is simultaneously present and future. It is present in Jesus's activity, but is not yet fully realized. Death, sin, temptation, and suffering still exist; Jesus teaches the prayer "your kingdom come." Exorcisms are therefore not proof that history has already attained perfection, but signs of the eschatological "already": God's future has entered the present and begun its transformation. This tensile structure may be described as "already—not yet." It guards against a triumphalism that ignores the reality of evil, and against a pessimism that no longer perceives the already-present efficacy of God's reign.

1.4 3. The Wilderness: The Temptation of Jesus as the First Confrontation with the Adversary

The Synoptic accounts of the temptation (Mark 1:12–13; Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13) give the whole of Jesus's mission the frame of a conflict with Satan. Immediately after the baptism, during which Jesus is named the beloved Son, the Spirit leads him into the wilderness. Mark uses a forceful verb: the Spirit "drives out" or even "casts" Jesus into the desert (*ekballei*). The same root will later be used for the casting out of demons. The point is not that Jesus becomes a victim of the Spirit, but that his messianic mission is from the outset a path of obedience that confronts the adversary in a place symbolically associated with Israel's testing. [6] Matthew and Luke develop this scene through three temptations. Satan does not propose the overt worship of evil in the first instance. He strikes at the manner of exercising sonship: at the use of power for oneself, at the coercion of a spectacular confirmation from God, and at the acquisition of authority over the "kingdoms of the world" through the rendering of homage to the adversary. Jesus responds with quotations from the Book of Deuteronomy, that is, with words associated with Israel's wandering in the wilderness. As

the Son, he remains faithful where Israel experienced unfaithfulness, and he rejects a reign based on self-sufficiency, spectacle, and idolatrous compromise.

This opening explains the nature of the subsequent exorcisms. Jesus does not battle Satan in order to take the place of an earthly despot himself. He refuses to receive the kingdoms of the world by glorifying the adversary, and then reveals the reign of God through service, healing, and liberation. The kingship of Jesus is the antithesis of a violence that instrumentalizes the human person. The wilderness establishes the hermeneutical point of reference: every authority, including religious authority, that detaches itself from obedience to the Father and from care for the human person can become a temptation, even when it employs the language of success.

In Luke 4:13 the devil departs "until an opportune time." This addition signals that the temptation is not a closed incident. It returns in the resistance to the way of the cross, in Satan's entry into Judas (Luke 22:3; John 13:27), in the fear of the disciples, and in the hour of the passion. The narratives about demons and the passion are therefore part of a single narrative: the adversary seeks to break the Son's obedience, but his action is turned into the place of the revelation of God's love and victory.

1.5 4. Mark: The Authority of Jesus and the Reclaiming of the Human Person for Community

The first exorcism in Mark 1:21–28 has exceptional compositional weight. It takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum, that is, in the midst of the assembly of Israel and in the space of teaching. The unclean spirit cries out: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus's response is brief: "Be silent, and come out of him." The spirit convulses the man, cries out with a loud voice, and departs. The witnesses do not focus solely on the extraordinary nature of the phenomenon; they ask about "a new teaching—with authority." In Mark's narrative, the word of Jesus and the act of Jesus are inseparable. The reign of God comes as a teaching that has efficacy against that which enslaves the human person. [1]

The command of silence directed at the spirit is also significant. Jesus does not accept the demon's "testimony," even though it recognizes his identity. The truth about the Son of God is not to be proclaimed by a hostile power, nor extracted from the context of the cross. In Mark, the full recognition of Jesus matures gradually and is paradoxically uttered beneath the cross by the centurion (Mark 15:39). The exorcism reveals the real authority of Jesus, but does not yet supply a ready-made, mystery-free Christology.

Mark then summarizes that people brought to Jesus those who were sick and those who were possessed, and that he "would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (Mark 1:32–34). The text does not permit the separation of care for the body from liberation from evil power, but neither does it equate them. Jesus touches Peter's mother-in-law who is ill, cleanses a leper, forgives and heals a paralytic, and also casts out spirits. The whole reveals his authority as the restoration of the integrity of the person and of relationships within the community. The reign of God is not an abstract idea of cosmic order; it touches the concrete human being, who recovers voice, body, home, and the possibility of participation in the life of others.

The pericope of the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20) has a particular intensity. The man lives among the tombs, is bound with chains, cries out, and bruises himself with stones. The narrative presents a radical disintegration: the severing of ties with home, city, body, life, and cultic purity. The name "Legion" underscores the multiplicity and destructive scale of the bondage. It is sometimes interpreted as an allusion

to the Roman occupation; the association may be literarily suggestive, especially in the world of imperial violence, but the narrative itself does not reduce "Legion" to an allegory of Rome. Its primary aim is to show that no hostile force, however multiplied, lies beyond the reach of Jesus's authority. [1]

The fruit of the exorcism is not limited to the departure of the spirits. The liberated man sits "clothed and in his right mind," and is then sent to his own home to proclaim the mercy he has received. This is an image of restoration. The man, previously deprived of voice and place, becomes a witness. It is precisely here that the political and social—though not partisan—dimension of the kingdom is visible: God's reign rebuilds the subjectivity of those whom evil has cast beyond the boundaries of ordinary community.

1.6 5. The Beelzebul Controversy: The "Strong Man's House" and the Logic of Victory

Mark 3:20–30, Matt 12:22–32, and Luke 11:14–23 are the most important texts for the thesis that Jesus's battle with the spirits constitutes an essential element of the reign of God. The immediate occasion for the controversy is an exorcism. The opponents do not deny the effectiveness of Jesus's action; they propose instead an explanation according to which he casts out demons by the power of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Jesus's response has three stages: the argument about a divided kingdom, the declaration about acting by the Spirit or the "finger" of God, and the parable about the binding of the strong man.

The first argument is logical in character: Satan casting out himself would destroy his own reign. Jesus does not thereby explain everything about the nature of evil, but exposes the contradiction of the accusation. His deeds are not an internal reorganization of Satan's kingdom. They are its violation. The second stage states the matter positively: the exorcism is performed by the power of the Spirit of God in Matthew, and by the "finger of God" in Luke. The juxtaposition of both traditions does not create an opposition. The "finger of God" evokes the biblical language of God's effective, irresistible intervention, known especially from the account of the Exodus from Egypt; exegetical literature also analyzes the possible connection of this phrase with its Deuteronomic background. [4] [7]

The third stage is the image of the battle for the strong man's house. "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man" (Mark 3:27). The image does not provide grounds for the mechanical creation of rituals of "binding Satan"; its function is christological. Jesus interprets his own exorcisms as evidence that he has already entered the sphere controlled by the adversary and has the upper hand over him. The "property" consists not of objects but of human beings being reclaimed for God's reign. It is precisely for this reason that the exorcism is not a marginal miracle: it is a visible sign that one stronger than the strong man is already at work.

In Matthew the phrase "the kingdom of God has come to you" appears between the recognition of the source of power and the image of the strong man. The logic of the text is precise: the Spirit of God → Jesus's exorcisms → the arrival of God's reign → the limitation of Satan's dominion. Luke reinforces the aspect of confrontation by adding the image of the fully armed strong man, whom "one stronger than he" comes to overcome (Luke 11:21–22). This is not a matter of the metaphysical symmetry of two equal powers. The stronger one is not revealed as yet another competitor; he is the Son sent by God, in whose action God himself wrests authority over the human person from the adversary.

“But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which