Phenomenology of States of Possession in the Gospels

Abstract
The aim of this analysis is a phenomenological description of the images of states designated in the Gospel texts as “possession” (Gr. daimonizomai and related terms). The phenomenological method consists in taking the Gospel narrative “in brackets” — suspending preliminary causal explanations (both medical and supernatural) — in order to describe as precisely as possible the manner in which the phenomenon is revealed: disturbances of communication, the I–other relationship, bodily functions, the relation to the environment, and the transformation of the state before and after the encounter with Jesus. The text emphasizes the necessity of hermeneutical caution and points to the need for cooperation with medical and psychological assessment where appropriate. The Gospels are analyzed as theological narratives describing real human suffering in the language of antiquity, not as clinical documentation.

Keywords: possession, daimonizomai, phenomenology, Gospels, exorcism, Gerasene, epileptic seizure, medical differentiation, biblical anthropology

I. What is phenomenological analysis?

1. What is phenomenological analysis?
   Phenomenological analysis does not begin with the question: “What is the ultimate cause of the phenomenon?”, but with: “In what way does the phenomenon reveal itself and how does it change the experience of the body, consciousness, will, and relations with the environment?” With respect to the Gospels this means a temporary “taking in brackets” of both medical reduction and hasty supernatural verdict. First one must precisely describe:

- the person’s behavior;
- the degree of preservation of consciousness;
- the relation between his “I” and the speaking spirit;
- bodily reactions;
- the way the voice is used;
- the attitude toward pain;
- the relation to the environment;
- the state before the encounter with Jesus and after deliverance.

One must also remember that the Gospels are not contemporary clinical documentation. They do not give the duration of seizures, neurological status, substances taken, or results of

examinations. They are theological narratives that describe real human suffering in the language proper to antiquity. In this work one should maintain hermeneutical caution and indicate — where possible — the necessity of medical and psychological assessment.

II. The term “possession”

1. Daimonizomai — “to be under the action of a demon”
   The Polish word “opętany” (possessed) suggests total possession of a person. The Greek New Testament uses, among others, the following expressions:

- daimonizomai — to be under the action of a demon;
- echein daimonion — to have a demon;
- en pneumati akathartō — to be “in an unclean spirit”;
- ochloumenos hypo pneumatos akathartou — to be harassed by an unclean spirit.

These terms describe different degrees of demonic influence. They do not form a precise, uniform classification of a person’s “possession.” Therefore phenomenologically it is more accurate to speak of:

- loss or limitation of self-determination;
- intrusion of foreign agency;
- separation of the person’s voice and the spirit’s voice;
- deformation of bodily functioning;
- subordination of certain human functions to a foreign power.

III. Basic evangelical images

1. The man in the synagogue — Mk 1,23–27; Lk 4,33–36
   The description is short. The man is present in the synagogue, which implies he probably functions socially before the manifestation. In Jesus’ presence the spirit begins to speak: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God.” Jesus answers: “Be silent and come out of him.” The following occur:

- violent convulsion;
- a cry;
- the departure of the spirit;

- according to Luke — no harm done to the man.

Phenomenological picture
There is a sudden transition: ordinary functioning → confrontation → foreign utterance → convulsion → regaining calm. The voice issues from the man's mouth, but the evangelist ascribes it to the spirit. A split arises between:

- the speech apparatus belonging to the person;
- the subject of the utterance identified as an unclean spirit.

This is not, however, "the gift of tongues." The utterance is communicative and intelligible. Its extraordinariness lies in its content — recognition of Jesus' identity — not in the use of an unknown language.

1. The Gerasene (Mk 5,1–20)
   This is the fullest evangelical description of a state of possession. The Gerasene:

- lives among the tombs;
- is excluded from the community;
- according to Luke does not wear clothes;
- breaks chains and shatters fetters;
- cannot be restrained;
- cries out day and night;
- wounds himself with stones;
- runs toward Jesus;
- falls before Him;
- speaks in the first person but introduces himself as "Legion";
- after deliverance sits clothed and "in his right mind."

4.1. Disintegration of life-space
The person ceases to live in a house and dwells among tombs. The tomb is a space of:

- death;
- ritual impurity;
- social exclusion;
- rupture with family;
- the boundary between the world of the living and the dead.

Possession therefore has not only an internal dimension. It destroys a person's place in the world.

4.2. Loss of subjectivity

Jesus asks: "What is your name?" The answer is: "My name is Legion, for we are many." We do not receive the person's personal name. His "I" is covered by the name of a collective power. Phenomenologically this is the experience of extreme loss of ownership of oneself:

- my body no longer functions as mine;
- my voice does not express my "I";
- my name is replaced by the name of a foreign presence;
- one person becomes the site of the action of many voices.

"Legion" also has possible military and political connotations. It denotes an organized, oppressive multitude, not merely a large number of chance spirits.

4.3. Loss of bodily dignity

Nudity, living among tombs, crying, and self-injury signify the breakdown of normal care for the body. The person no longer experiences his own corporeality as a safe place of personal existence. After deliverance he is described as:

- sitting;
- clothed;
- sane;
- able to converse;
- able to undertake a mission.

It is not accidental that the Gospel shows the final state by reversing earlier symptoms:

Before the encounter	After deliverance
Running and agitation	Sitting
Nudity	Clothing
Crying	Conversation
Tombs	Return home
Self-injury	Safety
“Legion”	Recovered subjectivity
Isolation	Mission toward relatives

Thus the goal of the exorcism is not merely the silence of the demon, but the restoration of the person.

1. The boy from Mk 9,14–29
   The father describes the spirit as mute, and Jesus calls it “mute and deaf.” The boy’s condition includes:

- loss of speech;
- probable loss of hearing;
- sudden falls;
- convulsions;
- rolling on the ground;
- foam at the mouth;
- grinding of the teeth;
- body stiffening;
- being thrown into fire and water;
- a state resembling death after the attack subsides.

In Jesus’ presence the boy is violently convulsed, falls and rolls, with foam at his mouth. After the spirit departs he remains limp “as if dead.” Jesus takes him by the hand, raises him, and the boy stands.

5.1. Similarity to an epileptic seizure
The description contains symptoms that may resemble a tonic-clonic seizure:

- fall;
- phase of stiffening;
- convulsions;
- drooling or foaming;
- disturbance of consciousness;
- subsequent marked exhaustion.

Matthew even uses the verb selēniazomai, traditionally translated as “to be lunatic,” “to suffer from epilepsy,” or literally “to be struck by the moon.”

However, this does not provide grounds for a retroactive diagnosis of epilepsy. We do not possess:

5.2. Clinical data and examinations necessary when seizures are suspected

In recognizing epileptic seizures and distinguishing them from phenomena interpreted as “possession” the author lists necessary elements of clinical and diagnostic examination:

- EEG recording;
- precise characterization of the seizures;
- neurological history;
- information about fever, injuries, and illnesses;
- the possibility of observing the patient.

Contemporary neurology explains epilepsy as a disorder related to abnormal electrical activity of the brain. Seizures can cause loss of consciousness, uncontrolled movements and bodily injuries. One should keep in mind the position of medical authorities (e.g., WHO), which treat epilepsy as a medical condition requiring diagnostic work-up and treatment.

5.3. Ancient approaches to seizures — diversity of explanations

It is not true that in antiquity a solely demonic explanation of seizures and convulsions prevailed. As early as the fourth century BC the author of the Hippocratic treatise On the Sacred Disease opposed religious explanations of epilepsy and argued for natural causes.

The Gospels themselves can distinguish different groups of the afflicted:

- the sick in general;
- those suffering various pains;
- the possessed;

- epileptics;
- the paralyzed (cf. Mt 4,24).

However, the narrative regarding the boy in Mk 9 combines bodily symptoms with the action of a spirit. The exegete must respect the intention of the text, while a contemporary pastor and clinician cannot on this basis automatically recognize every epilepsy case as possession. It is necessary to refer to medical and psychological examinations and to a differentiation of causes.

III. ANESTHESIA TO PAIN

6. Do the Gospels describe analgesia?

Gospel accounts do not explicitly assert the existence of analgesia as a feature of possession. For example, in the description of the Gerasene (Mk 5) we read that he “was cutting himself with stones” (Mk 5,5) — the text indicates self-injury, but does not pronounce:

- that he did not feel pain;
- that his body was insensitive;
- that wounds did not occur;
- that he reacted to injuries differently than an ordinary person.

One can speak of behavior despite pain (or of a removal of inhibitions that prevent self-injury), but not of documented lack of sensation. Similarly the description of the boy from Mk 9, who is thrown into fire and water, indicates life danger and lack of control over behavior, but does not confirm lack of pain perception.

7. Phenomenological interpretation of self-injurious behaviors

The Gerasene’s self-injury can be interpreted phenomenologically as an expression of:

- extreme despair;
- a compulsion to act;
- loss of the body’s protective function;
- disturbance of the boundary between “I” and one’s own body;
- an attempt to discharge unbearable tension;
- directing destructive aggression against oneself;
- subordination of the body to a foreign will.

In this perspective it is not essential that nervous tissue ceased to feel pain, but that pain ceased to function as an inhibition of destructive behavior.

8. Contemporary perspective: causes of altered reaction to pain

Change in perception or reaction to pain can occur in various clinical and psychological states, among others:

- intense psychomotor agitation;
- shock;
- the action of adrenaline and stress mechanisms;
- intoxication with psychoactive substances;
- mania or psychosis;
- dissociative states;
- certain neurological disorders;
- autoaggressive behaviors;
- learned pain tolerance.

Dissociation can influence pain perception, but empirical studies do not allow adoption of the simple rule “dissociation causes analgesia.” Literature has observed both decreased and increased pain sensitivity, and experiments inducing dissociation have not shown unambiguous analgesia. Therefore lack of a typical response to injury is not by itself proof of possession — a differential diagnosis including medical and psychological examination is necessary.

IV. “SUPERNATURAL STRENGTH”

9. Mark 5’s testimony about the Gerasene’s strength

The evangelist Mark emphasizes the extraordinary strength of the Gerasene: “For they had often bound him with shackles and chains, and he had been driven out of the bonds and broken the chains; and no one could tame him” (Mk 5). In the narrative this strength serves several functions:

- it shows the degree of enslavement;
- it underscores the helplessness of the community and its means of control;
- it prepares the contrast between the powerlessness of human safeguards and Jesus’ authority;

- it demonstrates that violence and physical bonds do not solve the problem;
- it documents that the man was tried to be controlled but not healed.

9.1. Strength without freedom — the paradox of the narrative

The paradox of the story is that the Gerasene possesses extraordinary physical strength and at the same time is existentially helpless. He can break chains, yet cannot:

- return home or reintegrate into the community;
- stop injuring himself;
- recover his name and identity;
- gain control over his own body.

The evangelical interpretation of freedom is not reduced to maximization of muscular strength, but to the recovery of self-mastery and the possibility of living in community.

10. Contemporary explanations of seemingly extraordinary strength

Under conditions of acute agitation a person can mobilize maximal muscular strength, ignore fatigue or pain, perform unpredictable and violent movements while using the weight of the body. Psychomotor agitation occurs in psychosis, mania, delirium, intoxication or acute stress reaction — it is a state requiring determination of cause, not a standalone diagnosis.

Additionally, “superhuman strength” in eyewitness accounts may result from:

- exaggerated reporting by observers;
- misjudgment of weight or resistance;
- surprise and ineffective restraint techniques;
- the use of worn or improvised restraints;
- omission of subsequent fatigue and injuries.

Contemporary medicine does not know a single symptom of “superhuman strength” that would determine a supernatural cause. Exegesis of Mk 5 should, however, honestly record that the evangelist presents the Gerasene’s strength as a clear manifestation of the spirit’s action.

V. VOICE AND SPEECH

11. Foreign agency of the voice

In the Gospel accounts the spirit uses the voice of the possessed person. Characteristic features of this phenomenon are:

- sudden change of the subject of the utterance;
- use of the plural (“What have you to do with us?”);
- the demon’s knowledge of Jesus and his identity;
- speaking on behalf of many spirits;
- protest against deliverance;
- separation of the person from the words coming from his mouth.

Phenomenologically one may speak here of the experience “the voice is mine physically, but the utterance is not experienced as mine.” There are contemporary analogues of this experience in certain dissociative, psychotic and trance states, but phenomenological similarity does not resolve the identity of the cause.

12. Demons’ knowledge of Jesus — scope and meaning

In the Gospels the spirits recognize Jesus and call him names such as “Holy One of God” (Mk 1,24), “Son of the Most High God” (Mk 5,7) or “Son of God” (Mk 3,11). Features of these utterances should be understood as follows:

- the demons’ utterances mostly concern Jesus’ identity, not extensive secrets about other persons;
- Jesus often commands the spirits to be silent, which limits the scope of revealed content;
- a demon’s knowledge is not automatically an expression of salvific faith or theological recognition;
- utterances may serve manipulation, defense, or expression of fear of judgment.

In the evangelical phenomenology the key point is the spirit’s reaction to Jesus’ presence: immediate recognition of authority, fear of judgment, and awareness of impending defeat.

VI. “GIFT OF TONGUES” — necessary correction

13. Absence of glossolalia in descriptions of possession in the Gospels

In the Gospel descriptions of possession there is no glossolalia understood as the “gift of tongues”:

- no Gospel states that the possessed person spoke in a language unknown to himself;
- they do not describe the use of a foreign national tongue, unintelligible syllables or an angelic language;
- demons speak in a language understandable to Jesus, the disciples and the witnesses.

The extraordinary element is the identity of the speaker and the content of the utterance, not the linguistic code. The term “gift of tongues” should be reserved for the charism described primarily in:

- Acts 2:1–13;
- Acts 10:44–48;
- Acts 19:1–7;
- 1 Cor 12–14.

14. Demonic speech and charism — comparative analysis

It is important to distinguish between the speech of an unclean spirit and the charism “gift of tongues.” Below is a synthetic comparison of characteristics of these two phenomena (based solely on evangelical content and the charismatic Christian tradition mentioned above):

- Speech of an unclean spirit
  - language understandable to those present (Jesus, disciples, witnesses);
  - content focuses on Jesus’ identity, protest or defense;
  - typically appears in confrontation with Jesus;
  - has a defensive, manipulative or fearful character;
  - is not described as a gift contributing to the building of the community.
- Gift of tongues (charism)
  - often associated with speaking an unknown language or with understanding in translation;
  - content oriented toward praise, prayer or proclamation (in a communal context);

- appears in liturgical, prayerful and missionary contexts (Acts, 1 Cor);
- has a gratuitous character, intended to build the Church and its mission;
- regulated by communal rules (cf. 1 Cor 12–14).

In light of the above, the speech of an unclean spirit does not correspond to the charism “gift of tongues” described in Acts and Paul’s letters. Therefore these terms should not be used interchangeably.

15. Practical and pastoral-clinical conclusions

- Historical-exegetical reading of the Gospels requires terminological precision: demonic descriptions differ from descriptions of medical and clinical disorders, and vice versa.
- In pastoral and clinical practice caution is required: one must not diagnose possession on the basis of a single linguistic symptom or other behavior without prior medical and psychological assessment.
- The phenomenological distinction between demonic speech and the charism has real pastoral and liturgical consequences — use of imprecise categories can lead to erroneous recognitions and inappropriate interventions.
- In every case where there is suspicion of a neurological or psychiatric disorder (e.g., seizures, disturbances of consciousness, intense agitation), cooperation with a physician, neurologist and mental health specialist and clinical observation are necessary before any actions of a spiritual nature are undertaken.

Maintaining this combination of exegetical fidelity to the source text and responsible clinical caution constitutes the basis for a reliable interpretation and pastoral practice regarding phenomena described in the Gospels.

Continuation — analysis and synthesis

VII. OTHER EVANGELICAL PHENOMENA

14. Prophetic utterances and speech charisms — features and rules of discernment

In the evangelical texts and the New Testament various manifestations of speaking appear that require careful discernment. The following theological-phenomenological observations ought to

be distinguished and taken into account:

- They appear in confrontation with Jesus.
- They appear after the descent of the Holy Spirit.
- They defend demonic presence.
- They serve the glorification of God.
- The spirit does not want to depart.
- The believer accepts the gift.
- Jesus commands silence.
- Paul regulates the use of the gift.
- The utterance can arouse fear.
- The gift is meant to serve the building of the community.
- There is a loss of the person’s self-determination.
- “The spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets” — 1 Cor 14:32.
- Speech is intelligible in the narrative.
- It may require interpretation.

Paul emphasizes order and community responsibility: if there is no translator, the speaker should remain silent in the assembly (1 Cor 14:28). The charism must not destroy a person’s subjectivity. The Holy Spirit does not annihilate freedom but enables responsible service. All these elements are important in discerning the authenticity and character of prophetic speech in a biblical and ecclesial perspective.

15. Glossolalia and xenoglossia

One should distinguish two phenomena often confused in literature and spiritual practice:

- Glossolalia — fluent vocalization of syllables resembling speech but lacking recognizable meaning for listeners.
- Xenoglossia (xenolalia) — the alleged ability to use a real language that the person has not previously learned.

Important methodological remarks concerning recognition of xenoglossia:

- Unusual sound is not yet evidence of mastery of a foreign language.
- To reliably confirm xenoglossia one would need: a full recording; precise phonetic transcription; assessment by independent native speakers of the claimed language; correct

grammar and vocabulary; ability to conduct a conversation; exclusion of prior contact with the language; an evaluation conducted without prompting.

- A single word similar to a word in another language proves nothing — the number of possible syllables is limited, so accidental resemblances are frequent.

From the point of view of religious and pastoral discernment:

- Contemporary glossolalia is not in itself either evidence of the Holy Spirit's action or evidence of possession.
- Its assessment requires taking into account the content of utterance, spiritual fruits, the degree of preservation of the speaker's freedom, the communal context, the participant's mental state, conformity with the faith and the person's ability to interrupt the utterance.

While maintaining methodological caution, one must at the same time respect the charismatic experience of believers and the requirement of order and responsibility according to Paul's teaching.

VII. OTHER EVANGELICAL PHENOMENA (continued)

16. Mutism and loss of hearing

In the evangelical accounts we encounter images of spirits described as "mute and deaf" (Mk 9). In healing descriptions: in Mk 9 after the demon is cast out the man begins to speak; in Mt 9,32–33 after the demon is cast out the man begins to speak; in Mt 12,22 the possessed was blind and mute, and after healing sees and speaks.

Phenomenologically evil in these descriptions acts as a force:

- cutting off communication;
- enclosing the person in isolation;
- depriving the possibility of articulating one's own experience;
- hindering the reception of an external word.

However a clear clinical and hermeneutical reservation is necessary: one must not infer that deafness, mutism or speech disorders are usually or typically the result of demonic action. The Gospels also describe deaf and mute persons without attributing their state to an unclean spirit (e.g., Mk 7,31–37). In each case contemporary pastoral and medical practice requires various forms of assessment and specialist cooperation.

17. Convulsions

In the Gospel accounts convulsions appear in several contexts:

- in the synagogue in Capernaum — Mk 1,26;
- in the boy — Mk 9,20.26;
- in Luke’s description — the spirit throws the boy to the ground and violently convulses him.

In the ancient image convulsions often show a dramatic struggle of two powers: the spirit does not depart peacefully but tries to retain control or to harm the person one last time.

From the perspective of contemporary medicine and psychology similar external manifestations can have very different causes:

- epileptic seizures;
- functional dissociative seizures;
- fainting with myoclonic movements;
- reactions to substances (toxic or pharmacological);
- metabolic disorders;
- central nervous system infections;
- psychogenic reactions;
- deliberately simulated behaviors.

It should be emphasized that functional dissociative seizures are real, involuntary episodes that may resemble epilepsy, although they do not result from pathological electrical discharges of the brain. The International League Against Epilepsy distinguishes these phenomena in order to improve correct diagnosis and therapy.

18. Aversive reaction to Jesus’ presence

In the Gospel narratives the spirits react violently to Jesus’ person:

- they recognize Him;
- they cry out;
- they show fear;
- they beg not to be tormented;
- they try to determine the time of judgment;
- they ask for permission to enter the pigs.

One cannot mechanically transfer this image to contemporary cases. Aversion to:

- the church;
- the cross;
- prayer;
- a cleric;
- particular religious language

may also result from causes other than alleged demonic presence: religious trauma, anxiety disorders, prior violence, suggestion or worldview conflict. Aversion or resistance alone does not determine possession; full pastoral and diagnostic discernment is required.

VIII. ANCIENT PERSPECTIVE

19. Human as a being open to spiritual influences

Unlike the modern, often individualistic picture of the person as an autonomous “I,” in the ancient world the boundaries of the person were understood more relationally and permeably. Various forces and beings could act upon a human:

- God;
- the Spirit of God;
- angels;
- spirits of the dead;
- demons;
- blessings and curses;
- the community;
- forces associated with place.

From this perspective, possession meant the intrusion of a foreign subject into the sphere of a person’s action, the disruption of his personal integrity and of his social functioning.

20. Absence of a sharp “spiritual–psychological–somatic” division

Ancient texts do not formulate the sharp, present-day distinctions between soul and body, emotions, social relationships and religious state. Consequently demonological descriptions can combine:

- loss of speech;
- provocation of convulsions;
- destruction of family bonds;
- leading toward death;
- speaking through a person.

Contemporary diagnostics distribute these phenomena among neurology, psychiatry, psychology, toxicology and internal medicine. The Gospels, however, conceive of the human more integrally — as a psychosomatic-spiritual being embedded in relationships.

21. The social dimension of diagnosis

Designating a person as possessed in the context of an ancient community could serve social and practical functions:

- to explain behaviors incomprehensible to the surrounding people;
- to separate the person from his acts — “it is the spirit acting”;
- to lead to stigmatization;
- to justify isolation;
- to create the possibility of restoration to the community through exorcism.

In the case of the Gerasene the community responded mainly with violence and control: he was bound. Jesus does not reproduce that pattern — he removes the source of enslavement and restores to the person personal and social integrity.

IX. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

22. Possession trance disorder (ICD-11)

Contemporary medical classifications do not pronounce on the presence or absence of spirits; they describe observable phenomena. ICD-11 (WHO) includes the category “possession trance disorder” (code 6B63).

This category refers to states in which:

- the sense of one’s own identity is replaced by an identity attributed to a spirit or another entity;
- there is a loss of control over behavior;

- the episode is unwanted and involuntary;
- it causes distress or impairs functioning;
- it is not a culturally accepted part of a religious practice;
- it is not better explained by a neurological condition, a substance, or another disorder.

Interpreting such a classification requires subtlety: the classification does not assert “there is no spirit,” but indicates that medicine describes this phenomenon at a level accessible to the clinical method.

23. Key differential diagnoses

Phenomena interpreted religiously as possession can co-occur with or be confused with many medical and psychiatric disorders. The most important differential possibilities include:

- epilepsy;
- functional dissociative seizures;
- psychosis;

X. COMPARATIVE TABLE

The table below juxtaposes characteristic phenomena described in the pericopes of the Gospels with their understanding in the ancient perspective and with possible contemporary clinical counterparts. Before the table it is worth recalling: in discernment one should never treat a single sign as decisive proof of possession; similarity of symptoms does not determine cause.

- mania;
- severe PTSD;
- dissociative disorders;
- personality disorders;
- intoxication or withdrawal from substances;
- delirium;
- brain diseases;
- sleep disorders;
- autism or intellectual disability;
- conscious simulation (malingering);
- reaction to group suggestion.

No single phenomenon — strength, shouting, convulsions, an atypical voice, resistance to pain or religious aversion — constitutes an independent determination.

Phenomenon	Gospels	Ancient perspective	Possible contemporary equivalents
Self-harm	The Gerasene wounds himself with stones	The spirit leads the person toward death	Self-injury, psychosis, dissociation, severe agitation
Lack of typical pain response	Not explicitly stated	The body subordinated to a foreign power	Stress, substances, dissociation, altered pain perception
Unusual strength	Tearing off ropes and chains	Manifestation of the spirit’s power	Maximal agitation, pain-insensitive action, unpredictable resistance
Convulsions	Mk 1; Mk 9	Struggle of the spirit, violent expulsion	Epilepsy, functional seizures, poisoning, syncope
Foaming at the mouth	Mk 9	Visible manifestation of the spirit	Tonic-clonic seizure, respiratory and salivary disturbance
Loss of speech	Mk 9; Mt 9	The spirit blocks the person’s function	Neurological disorder, functional mutism, psychosis, trauma
Other voice	The spirit speaks through the person	A foreign person takes over the speech apparatus	Dissociation, trance, psychosis, prosodic change
Knowledge of Jesus	Mk 1; Mk 5	The spirit recognizes divine authority	No simple diagnostic counterpart
“Legion”	Multiplicity speaking through one person	Multiplicity of spirits	Fragmentation of identity, metaphor for collective violence

Phenomenon	Gospels	Ancient perspective	Possible contemporary equivalents
Nakedness and tombs	Lk 8; Mk 5	Impurity, death, exclusion	Disorganization, homelessness, psychosis, marginalization
Gift of tongues	Not present in accounts of possession	—	Religious glossolalia, trance vocalization; requires separate discernment

XI. PRINCIPLES OF RESPONSIBLE DISCERNMENT

24. Principle of double humility

The exegete and the pastor should avoid two extremes:

- Reductionism
  “Every possession in the Gospels was only an unrecognized illness.” Such an approach imposes a contemporary metaphysics on the text and ignores its deliberate distinction between illnesses and the activity of spirits.
- Demonization
  “Every similar contemporary symptom proves the presence of a demon.” Such a claim ignores the development of neurology and psychiatry, can lead to stigmatization and delay treatment.

A responsible stance is: similarity of symptoms does not mean identity of cause. In a concrete case one should conduct parallel discernment: medical, psychological and spiritual — observing the order of priorities and competencies.

25. Primacy of safety

In contemporary situations when symptoms threaten life or health, the priority is securing safety and urgent medical assistance. This applies especially to:

- convulsions;
- loss of consciousness;
- breathing difficulties;
- self-harm;

- aggression;
- delirium;
- poisoning;
- sudden disorientation;
- high fever;
- a first-time seizure.

Spiritual assessment may proceed in parallel or later, but it should not replace neurological or psychiatric diagnosis and treatment or emergency medical care. Forcibly restraining a highly agitated person may increase the risk of injury and asphyxiation — this is an important practical and ethical warning. The Gospels do not present physical fighting with the person as Jesus' method; his mode of action focuses rather on the authority of the word and on restoring the person to the community.

XII. THEOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS

26. Possession as the antithesis of the image of God

The evangelical phenomenology presents possession as a process of disintegration of the person:

- one "I" becomes the place of many voices;
- the body ceases to serve life;
- speech disappears or is appropriated;
- strength does not bring freedom;
- the person loses his name;
- home is turned into tombs;
- relation to people is replaced by isolation;
- the person moves toward self-destruction.

Jesus acts in the opposite direction: he separates the person from the spirit; restores speech; calms the body; raises the one who is lying down; returns the child to the father; restores the Gerasene to his family; turns the cry into testimony; leads from the tombs to life. These contrasting images indicate that the essence of the evangelical narrative is the restoration of integral personhood and communal belonging.

27. Christological criterion

In the interpretation of the evangelical pericopes the result of the encounter with Jesus has the greatest significance. The action of evil (in the gospel description) leads to:

- dispersion;
- violence;
- loss of freedom;
- isolation;
- death.

The action of Christ leads to:

- integration;
- peace;
- recovery of reason;
- relationship;
- freedom;
- life.

Conclusion
The Gospels indeed describe states that include extraordinary strength, self-harm, convulsions, altered voice, loss of speech and a radical limitation of subjectivity. They do not, however, explicitly describe total insensitivity to pain nor the “gift of tongues” as a symptom of possession. The Gerasene may act despite pain, but the text does not state analgesia. He tears off chains, yet his strength remains a paradoxical form of powerlessness: he cannot save himself. Spirits speak through people and recognize Jesus, but they use comprehensible speech — not glossolalia nor confirmed xenoglossy.

From a contemporary perspective similar pictures may occur in neurological diseases, psychoses, dissociative disorders, poisoning and extreme agitation. This does not mean either the automatic negation of evangelical spiritual reality, nor a licence to diagnose possession on the basis of symptom similarity. The deepest subject of the evangelical phenomenology is not a catalogue of extraordinary capacities, but the drama of loss and recovery of the person. The evil spirit does not make a person truly stronger, wiser or freer — it breaks his unity and turns his own body against him. Jesus, for his part, does not merely silence the manifestation; he restores the person to himself: sitting instead of running, clothed instead of naked, rational instead of shattered, returning home instead of living among the tombs.