

ESSAY:

**“What was Jesus’ understanding of the significance
of the healings and exorcisms he performed?”**

(Maximum 2500 words)

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Introduction

Reading the Bible, one can hardly ignore the presence of remarkable miracles. In the New Testament we find Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God and at the same time performing many healings and exorcisms. The understanding on this topic has been discussed from one end of the spectrum to the other. From the understanding that these phenomenons were merely used by Jesus because he felt compassion with the afflicted, to the understanding that Jesus had a deep theological agenda which he demonstrated through these signs.

While examining Jesus' understanding of the healings and exorcisms he performed, the emphasis will be on Luke's Gospel. Luke carefully arranges his writings in order to explain Jesus' mission. This, together with the actual miracles of Jesus, will show that Jesus' actions were not only brought to pass out of compassion, but also as an eschatological reinterpretation of Israel.

Prophet

Israel had prophets throughout her history to guide and speak God's words to her. A prophet, who was an instrument of revelation of God, was able to do miracles and signs (Deuteronomy 34:10-12). God used prophets to look after his people and to show his mercy through the miracles they performed. There are remarkable similarities between Jesus and the Old Testament (OT) prophets. For example, in Luke 7:11-15 the parallel is quickly drawn with Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-24). There are, however, some crucial differences, such as Elijah praying for the life of the son whereas Jesus spoke with an authoritative voice: 'Young man, I say unto thee, Arise'.¹ Witnessing this great healing, it is not surprising that the people regarded Jesus as a prophet and said 'God hath visited his people' (Luke 7:16). Undoubtedly, Jesus was aware of the fact that he himself had the power to perform miracles. Furthermore, being brought up in the Jewish tradition he knew that the works of miracles were fundamentally linked with prophets of God *and* with God stretching out to his people. It was through this understanding that he saw himself as more than a prophet (Luke 11:31-32). In that respect it is safe to say that the miracles at least gave him the awareness of being a key-person or Messiah in God's end-time reign—a reign which took place through his works.²

Exorcism

Luke 8:26-39

An important part of Jesus' proclamation was exorcism. One of the exorcisms can be found in Luke 8:26-39. Here Jesus finds a man who was occupied by demons, just like Israel was occupied by gentiles. The demons begged him to be sent into a herd of pigs. Jesus allowed them, and the whole herd rushed down into the lake and drowned. When Jesus asked for the name of this demon the answer was 'Legion' because they were with many. This name directly draws attention to Israel's political state—that of being occupied by the Legions of Rome. Most likely many Jews wanted to see the Romans be treated the same as these demons—drive them out of the country and destroy all their idols. Early writings demonstrate that this longing was going hand in hand with the eschatological understanding of Israel.³ Instead of answering this longing, Jesus reveals the real enemy (and battle), which are Satan and his minions.⁴

Finger of God

Another hint to Jesus' understanding of the exorcisms can be found in Luke 11:17-23, where Jesus' exorcisms are connected with the coming of the kingdom of God: 'But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you'. The emphasis is on the 'finger of

1 Cf. Van der Loos, *The miracle*, 237-239; Perel, *Die Wunder*, 77.

2 Twelftree, *Jesus*, 275.

3 E.g. The assumption 10:8. Cf. Patzia & Petrotta, *kingdom of God*, 70.

4 Twelftree, *Jesus*, 263.

God'. This in contrast with exorcists who used magical objects or cited the name of a holy person.⁵ Effectively Jesus claims that the kingdom of God has its existence in him. Lee annotates that the kingdom of God is not just a system but rather God himself.⁶ In this light, Craig correctly states that 'in claiming that in himself the kingdom of God had already arrived, as visibly demonstrated by his exorcisms, Jesus was, in effect, saying that in himself God had drawn near, thus putting himself in God's place'.⁷

Again one can detect the understanding that God manifests his mercy through miracles (exorcism in this case). This fundamental meaning of the exorcisms is used by Jesus to expound on a much bigger yearning—the inauguration of the kingdom of God.

Davidic King

The effect on the bystanders was, that they saw Jesus defeating an enemy and wondered if he could be the son of David. In effect they compared him with the one who fought the enemy on Israel's behalf (Matthew 12:23). The early eschatological understanding was mainly about a Davidic king who would reign over Israel and the nations—the submission of evil spirits and demolishing Satan's kingdom is absent in this early expectation. Early writings, however, show that it is in the time of Jesus that this extra dimension emerged.⁸ Consequently it is not uncommon for at least some of Jesus' contemporaries to see Satan as an enemy who needs to be defeated before God's kingdom can be established.

The aforementioned examples show that Jesus believed that the exorcisms were integral with the commencement of the kingdom of God. In addition, it seems apparent that he, because he casts out demons with such ease, is the Stronger One, and thus worthy to rule over the 'spoils' (Luke 11:21-22). In other words, the exorcisms are a deliberate demonstration of Jesus' messiahship. However, the Messiah did not come with an army to annihilate Israel's physical enemies, but rather to destroy Satan's rule and freeing its captives (thus in fact plunder Satan's kingdom).

House of Israel

In Luke 11:23-26 Jesus warns about returning demons. Wright states that Jesus seems to reflect on the earlier attempts of Israel to inaugurate God's kingdom. These attempts, e.g. the Maccabean revolt, 'could clean up the house for a while, but they could not prevent the demons [foreign armies] returning in force'.⁹ Wright has a good point when he notes that Jesus actually meant Israel when he talked about the 'house', because in verse 29 he refers to the nation as 'an evil generation'. Nonetheless, Knoch notes that Jesus likely referred to Israel who, since the Babylonian captivity, did not break the first commandment any more. He further states that this absence of idolatry did not result in the true worship of God but in a legalistic religion (hence Jesus' remark in verse 29), thus leaves the house (cleansed of idols) empty.¹⁰

People were discussing if Jesus could be the Davidic king (Matthew 12:23). Jesus did not repudiate this, but instead confirmed their thoughts by stating that God's kingdom came. At the same time he explains the exorcisms in symbolic terms to give an even deeper insight. Jesus fought Israel's battle, whereas Satan was Israel's biggest enemy. Israel would only be able to fill the house properly if they would recognise him (Matthew 12:30). Knoch notes that at the end of the time the 'unbelieving nation [empty house] will be forced to worship the image of the wild beast [Matthew 24:15].'

5 Josephus, *Antiquities*, 2:5.

6 Lee, *The Economy*, 38-39.

7 Craig, *Reasonable*, 322.

8 E.g. The assumption 10:1; The Testament of Levi 18:12.

9 Wright, *Jesus*, 456.

10 Knoch, *Concordant*, 112.

Armies will once again surround Jerusalem and an 'abomination' will be done in the city. This will make their state far worse than their previous plight.¹¹

To conclude Knoch's and Wright's interpretations, the explanation given by Knoch is more thoroughgoing. On the surface the two look identical but Wright's idea seems to focus on a physical explanation alone. Knoch takes both physical and spiritual aspects of the eschatological context into account and thus gives more credit to the overall teaching of Jesus.

Healings

Cosmic Battle

Just as with the exorcisms we see that Luke delineates Jesus' approach towards the healings as liberation from evil and by doing so Luke seems to make little difference in source between the two. The sickness of the woman in Luke 13:10-17 is explained to be caused by a *spirit* of infirmity. Jesus states that this woman was bound by Satan and thus implies that the ultimate source of sickness can be traced back to a cosmic battle with evil. This understanding is not strange if one keeps in mind that God initially created a world which was good but became corrupted by the interference of Satan. Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath-day. In Jewish tradition the creation-account became synonymous with victory and God intended to give rest after this victory. In other words, creation found his fulfilment at Sabbath and the Sabbath was depicted as a sign of resurrection.¹² Jesus was victorious in this battle and the 'people rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by him.'

Daughter of Abraham

In the aforementioned passage Luke uses the phrase '*daughter* of Abraham', which can only be found in Luke's gospel. Ringe points out that Jesus brought the woman 'from the margins to the heart of her people', just like 'Zachaeus [...] receives the blessing of being restored to being "a son of Abraham"' (Luke 19:1-11).¹³ This interesting note of Ringe points towards a deeper layer in Jesus' understanding. One can see a parallel to Exodus, just like YHWH liberated Israel from Pharaoh (and thus restored them as Abraham's descendants), Jesus liberated this daughter of Abraham from Satan.¹⁴ The healings are part of bringing the people out of captivity into the promised land, which is the kingdom of God.

Year of Jubilee

After the liberation from Pharaoh, Israel received their Sabbath-day (Exodus 16:23). Consequently, the salvation (loosening her from Satan) of this woman on a Sabbath was more appropriate than loosening cattle in order to drink. Kennard annotates that the Sabbath was more than the seventh day. For example, the Sabbath included a seventh year of release of debt (Deuteronomy 14:28-16:17) and after the last year of seven sabbatical cycles the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10). The Jewish Christians saw the kingdom of God as a future Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:9). Kennard states that this Deuteronomic ideal urged Jesus to release and liberate the oppressed.¹⁵ Kennard's explanation is a justified observation. That is to say, Jesus deliberately heals on the Sabbath-day because healing is what he 'ought' to do on the Sabbath-day (Luke 13:16). This, together with Luke 4:16-21, where Jesus read about the fulfilment of the year of Jubilee (cf. Isaiah 61:1-2, 35:5-6), seems to conclude that he believed that these healings demonstrated that the rest and feast of the Sabbath found its fulfilment in him. This interpretation of Jesus' miracles was not straightforward—as mentioned before, the idea of a Messiah who would battle and subdue spiritual forces was recently new. One can see the doubt in John the Baptist's question: 'Art thou he that should come' (Luke 7:19). Jesus' answer in Luke 7:22 demonstrates that he understood these miracles as essential

11 Ibid.

12 Levenson, *Creation*, 101. Cf. *The life*, 51:2.

13 Ringe, *Luke*, 187-188. Cf. Jeremiah 50:17; Matthew 10:6; Luke 15:4-7.

14 Exodus 3:20; 7:4-5; 8:19; 15:6

15 Kennard, *Messiah*, 128-129.

for his mission—in effect the miracles proclaim the good news (cf. Isaiah 61:1). Merz and Theissen think that Jesus rather referred to the miracles happening *around* him without saying that *he* was the author. The answer to John was more in the sense of that 'he himself was *perhaps* the “coming one” announced by John.'¹⁶ Merz and Theissen seem to imply that the miracles are no more than a side effect of the kingdom of God. Jesus, however, explained the miracles as part of his identity and through which he liberated the people from sin, diseases and oppression (cf. Isaiah 35:5-6). These miracles were there to proclaim liberty and Jesus was the author.

Matter of Life or Death

That Jesus saw his healings as part of a battle becomes apparent if one takes Mark 3:4 in account. Jesus' question, 'Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?', refers to a principle, which can be found in 1 Maccabees 2:29-48, that saving a life overrides the Sabbath. Jesus addresses this rule (*halakhic* argument) and thus implies (as with the exorcisms) that he was fighting Israel's battle. According to Merz and Theissen the healings were not a direct 'life-threatening emergency' and thus a liberal interpretation of the law by Jesus.¹⁷ Although some of Jesus' contemporaries undoubtedly argued down this line, it is not compelling since the Torah does not explicitly state what one can and cannot do on Sabbath-day. Merz and Theissen's argument, demonstrate that they in fact separate the spiritual realms from the natural world. Jesus, however, lived in a society with an overarching holistic worldview.¹⁸ In such a worldview it is not strange to see a battle with evil as a matter of life or death. It is clear that Jesus did not break the law as he was fully aware of all the aforementioned implications and rules of the Sabbath.¹⁹ Through the healings Jesus reminded the people of the rest they received when YHWH liberated them. However, Jesus' deeper understanding was, as demonstrated through the healings, that the future Sabbath-rest started with recognising him.

Conclusion

Through the exorcisms Jesus emphasised a new eschatological understanding which was already surfacing in his time. The exorcisms demonstrate the real battle which was not against Rome, but against Satan and his minions. By driving out demons, Jesus believed that he liberated people from their exilic state, and was thus fighting Israel's fight. This clearly resonated with the exilic history of Israel. Although they lived in their own country again, they were in effect still 'scattered' (occupied by a foreign army and marginalised). Through these exorcisms he demonstrated that he was the one who could restore and fill the house of Israel with true worship. Moreover, by claiming and demonstrating that he had the authority to exorcise, he believed that the kingdom of God had its existence in him.

Jesus' understanding of the healings he carried out, show more or less the same agenda as with the exorcisms. Again the resonance of Israel's history is to be detected. With the healings, however, Jesus seems to focus more on Israel's roots. By using the term 'daughter of Abraham' he illustrates the exodus from Egypt, where the descendants of Abraham were liberated and brought into the promised land. The fact that Jesus did these works on a Sabbath-day did not only reminded people of the covenant, which they received at mount Sinai, but also foreshadowed the promised rest which would come with the kingdom of God.

16 Merz & Theissen, *Historical*, 212 (italics mine).

17 Merz & Theissen, *Historical*, 294.

18 Twelftree, *Jesus*, 28.

19 N.b. rather than breaking it, he intensified the law (Matthew 5:1-8:1).

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