

POWER IN THE POOL:  
THE HEALING OF THE MAN AT BETHESDA AND JESUS'  
VIOLATION OF THE SABBATH (JN. 5:1–18)

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**Summary**

*The man whom Jesus healed at the pool of Bethesda in John 5 harboured a magical belief that God's power was at certain times impersonally resident within the water and thus accessible apart from any direct intention or action by God. Similarly the Jews' response to the man's healing betrays their belief that, by healing on the Sabbath, Jesus has used God's power in a way unsanctioned by God and therefore independent of God. In this context, the healing functions as a sign that the actions of Jesus are one with those of God. This sign is subsequently taken up in and explained by the following discourse which likewise has as its central theme the absolute unity which exists between the actions of the Son and his Father.*

**I. Introduction**

Much of what Scripture says about God is stated in deliberate contrast to pagan notions concerning the spirits and the operation of spiritual power. In what follows, I will attempt to show that much is gained by attending to the sub-text of anti-pagan rhetoric in the story of Jesus' healing of the man at the Bethesda pool in John 5. In recent years, a spate of rhetorical studies of this text have detected a number of 'gaps' in the narrative.<sup>1</sup> These gaps do not escape the attention of traditional exegetes who have, however, tended to regard them as fissures which

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<sup>1</sup> See especially D.L. Mealand, 'John 5 and the Limits of Rhetorical Criticism', in *Understanding Poets and Prophets*, Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson, edited by A. Graeme Auld (JSOTSS; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 258–72.

may be used to isolate the text's sources or to identify stages of textual development as a mirror of a putative Johannine community.<sup>2</sup> My contention is that many of these gaps can be filled or at least narrowed by considering the way in which the text correlates the lame man's magical understanding of the operation of power in the waters of Bethesda with the Jews' view of Jesus' power. Listening to the story in this way enables us to understand the text as a unified whole by clarifying the relationship between this particular healing and the following discourse. Though many detect links between the Sabbath controversy and the discourse, the way in which the healing itself functions as a sign that the following discourse explicates requires further clarification. This essay shows how the healing of the man on the Sabbath functions as a sign of the unity between the actions of the Son and the Father, an idea central to the following discourse. It will also provide a more satisfying answer than has yet been given to the puzzling question of why Jesus seeks out the man to admonish him to continue in sin no longer.

## II. Power in the Pool

Ironically, one factor which has played against an appropriate understanding of the man at the pool has been the correct—now virtually universal—recognition that the end of verse 3 and the whole of verse 4 are not authentic. The insertion of this gloss provided an explanation of the water's healing power: the periodic stirring of the water by an angel infused the water with power sufficient to heal the first person to enter the water. Because this explanation is not authentic, the tendency has been to associate the magical understanding of the water's healing power with a later glossator to such a degree that the importance of magic to the original story is overlooked. Fortna even suggests that 'originally no legend was connected with the water, which was simply an intermittent spring thought to have a healing effect on the bather. There was no question, then, of a troubling of the water by an angel (v. 4) or of healing granted only to the first to step into the pool (as the glosses [in vv. 3b–4] assume). The man was

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<sup>2</sup> Such approaches to the text remain remarkably common. See, recently, Michael Labahn, 'Eine Spurensuche anhand von Joh 5.1–18: Bemerkungen zu Wachstum und Wandel der Heilung eines Lahmen', *NTS* 44 (1998) 159–79.

simply prevented by his infirmity and by the crowd from reaching the pool while the water was flowing.<sup>3</sup>

However, verse 7 almost certainly suggests that magical views of healing were held not simply by the glossator but by the invalid whom Jesus heals.<sup>4</sup> We see this in two ways. First, although verse 7 does not assign the water's power to an angel as does the gloss of verses 3b–4, it does indicate that the stirring of the water served as a signal for those gathered around the pool that the water was now alive with power to heal. Secondly, the invalid does not attribute his longstanding failure to be healed to an inability to get into the water while an intermittent spring was still stirring the water. Rather, he laments his inability to be the first into the water when it was stirred: since he has no one to help him, someone else goes down into the water ahead of him. Thus the idea that healing was 'granted only to the first to step into the pool' is not that of the glossator, as Fortna supposes; it belongs to the original story.

These elements in the story reveal a worldview tinged with magic. In particular, they suggest a belief that the water was infused with impersonal power. Whatever spiritual being might be credited as the source of the power, the power was regarded as accessible apart from any specific intention of that source. Conventions for accessing impersonal power vary widely. In this case, the power of the water was appropriated in a way that appears purely arbitrary—entering the water before the power was depleted.

The characterization of these beliefs as magical requires some justification inasmuch as it suggests that magic may be identified by certain objective traits. This idea has been subjected to withering critique in recent years, in part because a previous generation of scholarship sought to identify objective characteristics of magic as a way of distinguishing religion from magic and of establishing the superiority of religion to magic. As a result, sociological approaches to magic, particularly structural-functionalist approaches, have largely

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Tomson Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*. (London: CUP, 1970), 59. Similarly John Christopher Thomas, "'Stop Sinning Lest Something Worse Come Upon You": The Man at the Pool in John 5', *JSNT* 59 (1995) 7.

<sup>4</sup> A few commentators note the 'magical' beliefs of the invalid but do not explore the significance of these beliefs for understanding the text. See, e.g., Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 137.

supplanted the earlier search for an objective understanding of magic. These sociological approaches tend to emphasize social deviance as the key feature of magic. Drawing on such approaches, Aune defines magic ‘as that form of religious deviance whereby individual or social goals are sought by means alternate to those normally sanctioned by the dominant religious institution.’<sup>5</sup> For Aune, then, the charge of magic is an assertion of deviance which functions as a form of name-calling intended to marginalize those so labeled. The effect of sociological construals of magic is to relativize the term so that all attempts to formulate a universally valid substantive definition of magic are rendered impossible. As Jonathan Smith notes, ‘The shift to a social understanding of the relations between the accuser and the accused *forbids* any attempt at a substantive, theoretical definition of “magic”.’<sup>6</sup> Smith has thus called for the abolition of the term in academic discourse.<sup>7</sup>

Several things must be said. First, by suggesting that magic may be identified by certain objective characteristics, I do not intend to reassert the older dichotomy of religion and magic. The study of what are now commonly referred to as ‘folk religions’ indicates that it is entirely possible to integrate magic into one’s religious beliefs. It is ironic that the focus on deviance or illegality as a universal characteristic of magic implicitly distinguishes it from the religious. Whereas earlier scholars had supposed that magic could be distinguished from religion on the basis of distinct practices, Aune and others have made an analogous distinction on the basis of deviance.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, though the charge of magic, whether ancient or modern, has frequently functioned sociologically as an accusation of deviance, this in no way suggests that magic may be defined as deviance. The

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<sup>5</sup> David E. Aune, ‘Magic in Early Christianity’, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, vol. II.23.2, Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1515.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘Trading Places’, in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, edited by Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Smith (‘Trading Places’, 16) rejects not only substantive definitions of magic but sociological definitions as well: ‘I wish I could share the confidence of some scholars that, although a substantive definition of “magic” is rendered impossible by a sociological approach, the sorts of social fissures and conflicts revealed by the accusations [of magic] are generalizable’ (p. 19).

<sup>8</sup> Though Aune (‘Magic’, 1516) asserts that magic is so intertwined with religion as to make distinguishing them ‘virtually impossible’, his understanding of magic as deviance from the matrix of religious traditions in which it exists effectively separates magic from its religious matrix.

fact that charges of deviance may be made without allegations of magic implies that allegations of magic must be based on objective criteria.<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, this more objective understanding of magic is often implicit even in the discussions of those who relativize magic by equating it with deviance. Thus, for instance, when Aune comes to the phenomena he gravitates toward those in which power is manipulated in a particular way. In his examination of the Jesus tradition, Aune states that four healing stories deserve special attention: the woman with the haemorrhage (Mk. 5:25–34), the deaf-mute (Mk. 7:31–36), the blind man near Bethsaida (Mk. 8:22–26), and the man born blind (Jn. 9). In these stories, power flows to the afflicted in ways that evoke techniques ‘well-known to Jewish and Graeco-Roman magical practitioners.’<sup>10</sup> In other words, there is something about the way the healings are performed rather than any indication of deviance which prompts Aune to consider them as magical. Thus does Aune qualify his definition of magic with the stipulation that activities are properly characterized as magic not simply when they are regarded as deviant but also when the goals sought are ‘attained through the management of supernatural powers in such a way that results are virtually guaranteed.’<sup>11</sup> In this way, Aune admits an objective criterion for identifying magic.<sup>12</sup>

Without suggesting that the criteria for identifying magic are uniform or universal, what follows turns on the widely observed phenomenon that perceptions of magic frequently arise when spiritual power is accessed or manipulated in order to achieve goals which are not specifically intended by the source of the power.<sup>13</sup> As we have seen, John deliberately portrays the invalid as one who believed the waters of Bethesda to be periodically infused with impersonal power.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in Ethiopia, the introduction of Protestant forms of Christianity has often been met with the charge of deviance from the dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but the charge of deviance is rarely based on allegations of magic, even though the various Protestant groups are overwhelmingly Pentecostal and often emphasize spiritual manifestations and claim experiences of spiritual power. This is even more striking given the common perception of magic within Ethiopian traditional religions and within deviant forms of Islam and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Aune, ‘Magic’, 1536–37.

<sup>11</sup> Aune, ‘Magic’, 1515.

<sup>12</sup> For a similar understanding of magic as distinguished by objective characteristics, see C.E. Arnold, ‘Magic’, in *Dictionary of the Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 580–3.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of impersonal power or *mana* in Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 386–87.

What follows is an attempt to show how this observation opens up new ways of understanding the story and the discourse which follows.

### III. The Source of the Pool's Power

The significance of the invalid's magical beliefs turns in part on whether he and the others gathered at the pool believed the source of the water's power to be God or some other spirit. The person responsible for the insertion of verses 3b–4 believed the power to come from God, albeit through angelic mediation. Though the gloss quite likely entered the text at an early stage, it is impossible to know whether the scribe had a source of knowledge of local beliefs regarding the pool at the time of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Absent the gloss, the original story does not indicate what those at the pool believed about the source of the water's healing power.

Some have suggested that the pool was an asclepion or serapeum—cultic centres, common in the Graeco-Roman world, where power for healing was sought.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on the work of A. Duprez, W.D. Davies argues that the site was a holy place of a pagan healing god. For Davies, the association of the pool with pagan deities serves his desire to see a progression in John's argument that the Word has displaced all sacred space—Jewish (ch. 2), Samaritan (ch. 4) and now pagan (ch. 5).<sup>16</sup> Similarly C. Koester accepts the arguments of Duprez and Davies that the site was pagan and sees the story as a warning against shared loyalties: unlike pagan deities who did not demand exclusive allegiance, Jesus calls for exclusive commitment.<sup>17</sup> L. Devillers likewise regards Bethesda as a pagan sanctuary. However, he argues that the healing of John 5 was originally situated at the pool of Siloam mentioned in John 9. The evangelist has relocated the healing to the

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<sup>14</sup> A possibility suggested by F.-M. Braun, *Jean le Théologien: Sa Théologie: Le Mystère de Jésus-Christ* (Études Bibliques; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1966), 104, and D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>15</sup> Asclepius and Serapis were the two gods most closely associated with Graeco-Roman healing cults.

<sup>16</sup> W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 312.

<sup>17</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 53–54.

pagan pool at Bethesda in order to demonstrate that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.<sup>18</sup>

However attractive these options may be as Johannine theology, they each rely on the assumption that the pool was known as a pagan healing centre during the first century, whether at the time of Jesus or, on the supposition that the association of the healing and the pool is secondary, at the time of the Fourth Gospel's final redaction. Can this be sustained? The work of Duprez had questioned the traditional location of the pool and had sought instead to situate the healing waters of John 5 in a complex of caves, pools and baths just east of the traditional site. He then attempted to show that this site was pagan, primarily on the strength of the discovery of votive offerings similar to those offered to Serapis and Asclepius elsewhere.

Most commentaries and reference works simply assume the validity of the traditional siting of the Bethesda pool under the influence of Joachim Jeremias's book, *The Rediscovery of Bethesda*. Jeremias identified the πέντε στοάς of John 5:2 as a trapezoidal arrangement of four spectacular Herodian colonnades surrounding twin pools across which cut a fifth. But the archaeology undergirding Jeremias's reconstruction does not withstand scrutiny. Not only is the alternative site proposed by Duprez entirely plausible, one recent assessment of the evidence refers now to the 'Nicht-Entdeckung' of the colonnaded structure 'discovered' by Jeremias.<sup>19</sup>

However, even if Duprez is correct in his location of the Bethesda pool, it does not necessarily follow that the site was used for pagan purposes during the first century. The votive offerings discovered at the site seem only to date to the period following the second Jewish war (AD 132–135) when the new city of Aelia Capitolina was founded on

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<sup>18</sup> Luc Devillers, 'Une piscine peut en cacher une autre: à propos de Jean 5,1–9a', *RB* 106 (1999) 175–205. An attempt to lend what appears to be late and rather dubious textual support to the view of Devillers has been made by Marie-Émile Boismard, 'Bethzatha ou Siloé', *RB* 106 (1999) 206–218.

<sup>19</sup> Max Küchler, 'Die "Probatische" und Betesda mit den fünf στοαί', in *Peregrina curiositas: eine Reise durch den orbis antiquus*, edited by Andreas Kessler, Thomas Ricklin, and Gregor Wurst (NTOA; Freiburg, Schweiz; Göttingen: Universitätsverlag; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 127–54. The reference to the 'Nicht-Entdeckung der πέντε στοάς' is an ironic reference to the German title of Jeremias's work, *Die Wiederentdeckung von Bethesda*. Küchler mounts a convincing textual and archaeological case that John refers to an 'eindrückliche Doppelanlage von Wasserreservoirs und Badeanlagen im norden des Tempels'—one known as the Sheep Pool and one as Bethesda—which existed at the time of Jesus. The Bethesda site is the one excavated by Duprez.

the ruins of Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> Though it is likely that local beliefs regarding the potency of the Bethesda pool's waters facilitated its assimilation into the Roman cult of Serapis and/or Asclepius at this time, this in no way establishes Bethesda as a pagan sanctuary during the first century.

Though recourse to unsanctioned sources of power in first century Palestine cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely that an asclepion associated with a pagan god would have been tolerated within Jerusalem in such close proximity to the temple. Koester cites Herod's placement of a golden eagle on the gate of the temple as proof that pagan practices could be tolerated in the proximity of the temple (Josephus, *War* 17:151). But Koester's example proves the opposite, for Josephus goes on to detail the immediate and violent Jewish response to Herod's action.

If Bethesda was not a pagan sanctuary in the first century, it is rather more likely that the story of John 5 points to magical notions regarding the operation of the power of Israel's God. In particular, the story points to an understanding of God as one whose power sometimes operated as an impersonal force occasionally found within the water. Such power was accessed in a purely arbitrary way. When the water became infused with power, the text implies that a tragically comic scene ensued: the infirm were suddenly stirred to a frenzied, pathetic dash by the stirring of the waters. It is to this understanding of the ways of God that John 5 draws a parallel in the Sabbath controversy which followed the healing.

#### IV. The Source of Jesus' Power

If the story suggests that the invalid believed that the pool's power operated apart from the intention of God to heal a specific person, similar beliefs are evidently held by the Jews in their assessment of Jesus' power. Nowhere do the Jews dispute that the power for the healing performed by Jesus had come from God.<sup>21</sup> At issue, rather, is

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<sup>20</sup> A fact acknowledged by Koester, *Symbolism*, 54. See also, Ingo Broer, 'Knowledge of Palestine in the Fourth Gospel?' in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, edited by Tom Thatcher and Robert Tomson Fortna (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 90.

<sup>21</sup> The charge of sorcery appears in the Synoptics but not in John. This may be because the charge of sorcery in the Synoptic tradition arises from Jesus' activity as an exorcist and not from his role as a healer. John, however, makes no mention of Jesus' exorcisms. It is true that in John's gospel Jesus is sometimes accused of having a

the legitimacy of using power from God on the Sabbath. This is a curious and as yet inadequately examined feature of Jesus' Sabbath healings both in John and in the Synoptic tradition. The Sabbath healings arouse ire because they are construed as Sabbath violations, but *they do not for that reason necessarily prompt suspicions about the source of Jesus' power*. This is significant for it suggests that Jesus could be regarded as wielding God's power in a way that violated God's will.

For instance, in Luke 13:10, Jesus' healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath does not lead the authorities to question the legitimacy of Jesus' power. Rather, the indignant synagogue ruler admonishes the people to come for healing on another day—hardly what one would expect if the ruler believed Jesus' power to be demonic. In John 9, the plot of the story of Jesus' healing of the man born blind on the Sabbath is carried along by the tension between the insistence of some that Jesus' Sabbath violation proved that he was not from God and the fact that his power apparently was from God. Though the healing of the blind man on the Sabbath initially leads some of the Pharisees to deny that Jesus is from God, others find the denial implausible given the unprecedented nature of the miracle (9:16).<sup>22</sup> In the end, the Jews simply declare that they do not know where Jesus is from (9:29).<sup>23</sup> This contrasts with the earlier statement of Nicodemus, who, speaking apparently on behalf of other Jewish authorities, declared that 'we know you a teacher from God since no one can do the works you do unless God is with him' (3:2). The man whose eyes Jesus opened

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demon. This, of course, is quite different from the charge of sorcery and, in any case, functions essentially as a charge of mental instability (note e.g. 10:21: 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad.' which is probably to be regarded as one charge, not two—so e.g. D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [Leicester; Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991], 390, and C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* [2nd edn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 378). That Jesus is not charged with sorcery in John has the effect of making Jesus' opponents appear all the more pernicious for they do not act against Jesus as someone whom they believe to wield evil power. Even after Jesus raises Lazarus, the Jews fret only that the effect of Jesus' 'many signs' will be to incite Rome to action against the nation and the temple (11:47–48).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. John 10:21 where the charge of some Jews that Jesus has a demon is rebutted without answer by other Jews with the incredulous question: 'Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'

<sup>23</sup> In John there is considerable irony in the way in which both Jesus and his opponents alternatively claim and then deny that the opponents know where Jesus is from (cf. 7:27–28; 8:14; 9:16). They know that he comes from God, but they do not really know God from whom he comes.

regards the declaration that they do not know where Jesus is from as incredible. ‘God does not listen to sinners’ (9:31) renders untenable the notion that Jesus has obtained power from God, even though he is not from God; ‘No one has ever heard of someone opening the eyes of the blind’ (9:32) renders absurd the idea that the power is not from God.<sup>24</sup> The man says, in effect: ‘How can you say you do not know where he is from when the power he wields can only come from God; can a man whose power is from God not be from God?’ Caught in the inconsistency, the Jews respond in rage. They are wilfully blind to the fact that Jesus is from God. Still, they cannot deny that Jesus’ power is from God and, significantly, they do not try.

Similarly, in John 5, no questions are raised against the divine origins of Jesus’ power. Indeed, the healing itself is unremarked; Jewish response to the healing focuses narrowly on the perceived Sabbath violation. That power for healing required the direct working of God himself is not considered for, if it had been, the healing on the Sabbath would have carried divine sanction. The Jews think Jesus capable of accessing God’s power outside the will of God, a conclusion necessitated by the belief that God would never have acted through Jesus to heal on a Sabbath. In this respect, the Jews regard the healing power of Jesus in the same way that the invalid regarded the healing power of the pool—the power is accessible independent of the direct working of God.

That the invalid’s magical views of the operation of divine power drive the subsequent narrative is confirmed by the otherwise puzzling interaction between Jesus and the invalid in verse 14. There Jesus finds the man and reminds him of his experience of divine power. But then he warns him to ‘stop sinning’. In John’s gospel ‘sin’ is closely associated with the unwillingness to believe that Jesus is the one in whom God is revealed and through whom God’s power works (e.g. 8:23; 16:9). In 15:24, the essence of sin is to see the power of God at work through Jesus and yet refuse to acknowledge that power as evidence of the self-revealing action of God in Jesus. The command to

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<sup>24</sup> This drives the conclusion of 9:33 that εἰ μὴ ἦν οὗτος παρὰ θεοῦ, οὐκ ἠδύνατο ποιεῖν οὐδέν. This does not suggest a belief on the part of the man nor of the Jews that someone not from God would be unable to wield spiritual power, as the NIV and NRSV may be understood: ‘If he were not from God, he could do nothing.’ Rather, it indicates that Jesus would not have been able to do anything about this particular form of blindness had he not been from God: ‘If he were not from God, he would not have been able to do anything [about blindness from birth].’

‘stop sinning’ must thus be understood as an admonition to cease regarding God’s power as operating in impersonal independence from the working of God. Apart from an acknowledgement of the self-revealing God directly working in Jesus, the healed man could only expect ‘something worse’ than his thirty-eight year infirmity—the prospect of final judgement.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the man immediately goes and reports Jesus’ identity to the Jews indicates not only that his views of God’s power remained unchanged but ties those views to the Jews and their subsequent persecution of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

## V. The Sabbath Violation

The convergence of the views of the invalid and of the Jews regarding the operation of divine power makes the healing story integral to the Sabbath controversy which ensues. Much as the Jews see God’s power working through Jesus apart from divine sanction, so too they regard the Sabbath law as possessing an authority that is independent of any ongoing expression of the divine will.

Jesus’ command to the healed man to carry his mat serves not merely as a demonstration of the healing but as a deliberate provocation of the Jewish authorities’ sensibilities regarding the Sabbath. As verse 10 indicates, the authorities initially had no way of knowing that the man had just been healed; they are confronted only with the man carrying his mat. As a result, they stop the man and declare his action to be unlawful. It is perhaps significant that the authorities do not ask the man why he is violating the Sabbath. Such a question would admit the possibility that a legitimate reason for carrying a mat on the Sabbath might exist.

Though he is not asked for a reason, the man gives one anyway: the man who had just healed him had told him to carry his mat. It should be noted that the reason offered by the man is not that his healing necessitated the carrying of his mat but that he had been told to do so

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<sup>25</sup> Jesus’ command ties the man’s continuation in sin with a future experience of ‘something worse’ than his thirty-eight year incapacitation. Whether it also posits sin—whether the same sin or another—as the cause of his lengthy illness must probably remain an open question.

<sup>26</sup> This stands against recent attempts to regard the man’s report to the Jews as the positive proclamation of a changed man. So, e.g. Thomas, “‘Stop Sinning’”, 18; Jeffrey L. Staley, ‘Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light: Reading Character in John 5 and 9’, *Semeia* 53 (1991) 63.

by a man with authority sufficient to heal him. The possibility that such authority to heal might support the command to carry a mat on the Sabbath is not considered: they respond not by asking the man, ‘Who healed you?’ but rather ‘Who is it that said to you, “take it up and walk”?’ In bypassing the healing authority of Jesus as relevant, the Jews reveal their conviction that no authority existed which could challenge or even qualify the absolute authority of the Sabbath law.

The invalid’s view of the healing power of the pool corresponds not only to the Jews’ perception of Jesus’ power but also to their understanding of the authority of the Sabbath law. This parallel has been insufficiently noticed, not least because of persistent claims that a traditional healing story has been artificially transformed by the evangelist into a Sabbath controversy in order to prepare for the discourse which follows.<sup>27</sup> Yet the parallel is precise. Both the invalid and the Jews are portrayed as harbouring views of divine power and authority which work as impersonal forces, independent of God’s ongoing control. Both the invalid and the Jews regard God’s power as operating apart of any intention by God to heal a specific person. In the same way, the Jews view God’s authority as impersonally resident within the Sabbath law, operating independent of any ongoing revelation of the divine will. Furthermore, the man understands God’s power as effective and accessible in a purely arbitrary way. This entails a view of God as a deity more interested in the tragically comical rush of a mass of sick people to get in the water than in human well-being. John probably intends this as an anticipation of the point made in John 7:21–23 in which Jesus attacks the Jews for interpreting the Sabbath law in a way which suggested that God was more concerned with strict adherence to the Sabbath than with human well-being.<sup>28</sup>

## VI. Sign and Discourse

A number of commentators contend that the connection between the sign and the discourse is generated by the Sabbath controversy. Not a

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<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 307.

<sup>28</sup> John 7:21–23 is explicitly connected with the healing of John 5. This is often taken as the dislocated conclusion of the Sabbath controversy in John 5. However, it is more likely that John places this explanation of the Sabbath violation in John 7 not only to serve his interests in John 7 but also to preserve the thematic unity between sign and discourse in John 5.

few hold the placement of the healing on the Sabbath to be a Johannine modification of the tradition precisely to make the story a suitable springboard for the discourse. Whether or not the Sabbath controversy is regarded as secondary, it is commonly held that the transition from story to discourse presupposes a well-known Jewish debate over whether or not God worked on the Sabbath.

Insufficient attention has been given to the fact that the evidence for such a debate is late. Evidence of rabbinic discussion of the issue prior to the beginning of the second century is absent altogether. Further, evidence that such a debate existed early in the second century is dubious: it requires the highly problematic assumption that the attribution of the debate to four rabbis of the early second century in *Exodus Rabbah* 30:9 is reliable.

To his credit, C.H. Dodd seeks to confirm the existence of the debate not merely with late rabbinic sources but by appeal to Philo of Alexandria.<sup>29</sup> Philo, it seems, worried about the implications of the statement in Genesis 2:3 that on the seventh day God rested from all his work. Philo cannot admit the possibility that God rested from his work in an absolute sense and in various places suggests different explanations of the idea that God rested from all his work on the seventh day. In *de Cher.* 86–90, for instance, he argues that though God's activity continues even after creation, he can also be regarded as permanently at rest because his activity is unwearying. In *Leg. All.* 1:5–6 Philo suggests that on the sixth day God rested from the creation of mortal things.

Despite the use made of these texts by Dodd, Philo's concern is not with the later rabbinic question of whether or not God works on the Sabbath. Rather, he seeks to delineate the nature of the divine rest on the seventh day. Philo's conclusions may have been relevant to the later rabbinic debate inasmuch as they assume the ongoing activity of God after the sixth day, but Philo is not trying to make a case for whether or not God worked on the Sabbath. Philo's comments do not suffice then as evidence of an ongoing debate during or prior to the first century over whether God kept the Sabbath.

A text not considered by Dodd is *t. Shab.* 16.22 which reports a first century disagreement between the Houses of Shammai and Hillel

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<sup>29</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1953), 320–23.

concerning whether one ought to pray for the sick on the Sabbath. There is no indication, however, that the dispute issued from an existing debate about whether God works or could be induced to work on the Sabbath. Rather, inclusion of the dispute about prayers for the sick in a discussion of the permissibility of activities done for the benefit of others on the Sabbath would seem to suggest that the disagreement had to do with whether prayer for the sick should be regarded as a non-essential and hence avoidable Sabbath activity.

It should also be noticed that Jesus' words in John 5:17 do not necessarily presuppose an ongoing debate concerning God's observance of the Sabbath. Jesus says simply: ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται ... My contention is that these words should not be read as though they imply that the Father 'is still working after the completion of the six days' work of creation—even on the Sabbath' (emphasis added).<sup>30</sup> Rather, the words should be understood more absolutely as an assertion that God does not dissociate himself from his power so as to make it possible for Jesus to use God's power contrary to God's will. The sense then is this: 'My Father has not set his power loose in the world to be accessed as an independent force; if his power is at work in the world, it is because my Father is personally at work.'

Verse 17 therefore constitutes a specific rejection of what Jesus' accusers imply: that Jesus has somehow managed to draw upon God's power to heal the man in a way that God himself did not condone. Such a view of God's power as capable of being depersonalized is at odds with the ongoing presence and activity of God in the world.

The connection between the healing and the following discourse lies in Jesus' rejection of the assumption that he was a manipulator of impersonal divine power. Against this assumption, Jesus insists both that God's power is not impersonal and that there is an inseparable and active connection between his own powerful deeds and the working of God: 'My Father is still working and I am also working.' In the context, ἕως ἄρτι is emphatic. The Father does not disburse his power so that it becomes susceptible to manipulation as an impersonal force. Rather the Father is actively working in the world. And Jesus' own activity is coordinated and bound up with the work of his Father. If Jesus heals on the Sabbath, he does so not as one who brokers God's

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<sup>30</sup> The words are those of Nils Alstrup Dahl, 'The Johannine Church and History', in *The Interpretation of John*, edited by John Ashton (Studies in New Testament Interpretation; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 127.

power independent of, even in violation of God's will. Rather the working of power through him is a direct, active expression of God's working and will.

The discourse is widely understood as an explication of Jesus' assertion that his actions are to be understood as the actions of the Son whose submission to his Father is so complete, so absolute as to identify them completely with the actions of the Father. This much, at least, is clear. Less clear, however, has been how a discourse with this as its central point is to be related to the sign which precedes it. Of all the Johannine signs, it is perhaps the miraculous healing of John 5 whose sign quality has been most difficult to grasp. Many commentators do not reflect at all on the way the healing functions as a sign. This owes, in part, to the common perception that the connection between the healing and the discourse lies only in the placement of the healing on the Sabbath. Others have suggested that the healing functions as a sign that Jesus is the divine giver of life.<sup>31</sup> However, it is not clear how the healing of the invalid can be understood in any immediate sense as the giving of life. More importantly, though Jesus' role as a giver of life is part of the discourse, it serves only as one aspect of the more fundamental point that the Son's actions are one with the Father's.

On the understanding of the healing proposed here, the significance of the healing as a sign emerges. *The healing is a sign that the actions of Jesus must be understood as the actions of God himself.* As Jesus says in verse 19, 'The Son can do nothing *by himself*.' He heals a man who believed that God's power was an impersonal force present in the pool. By doing so on the Sabbath he confronts those who assume that Jesus wields God's power independent of God's will. In these circumstances, the healing serves as a sign of the central point of the discourse: that Jesus' does only what the Father does.

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<sup>31</sup> L.Th. Witkamp, 'The Use of Traditions in John 5:1-18', *JSNT* 25 (1985) 228; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 73; Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel the Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNTS; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 115.

## VII. Conclusion

The sign and the discourse of John 5 repudiate the idea that Jesus wielded power in a way that was independent of the working of God. The narrative links the belief of the invalid at the pool that God's power could reside impersonally in the pool with the belief of the Jews that Jesus made use of God's power in a way that God did not sanction. In the view of the Jews, Jesus' healing of the man on the Sabbath constituted a use of God's power in violation of God's will and therefore in independence of God's working. In this context, the healing functions as a sign that the actions of Jesus are one with those of his Father. The following discourse constitutes a response to the belief that Jesus could be working powerful miracles apart from the direct working of God. The Father does not dissociate himself from his power; the Son can do nothing by himself; the Son does only what the Father does.