CHAPTER TEN

THE SABBATH CONTROVERSY IN JOHN 5:1–18 AND THE ANALOGOUS CONTROVERSY REFLECTED IN PHILO’S WRITINGS

In all four gospels it is evident that the Sabbath observances caused conflicts between Jesus and others, and in all four there are examples of passages where a case story is followed by a subsequent unit of juridical exchange. Moreover, this dual structure is also seen in Philo. Philo also testifies to the fact that the Sabbath observances caused tension and conflict in society.

Philo and John

Scholars refer, of course, to Philo in their discussion of the Logos, ὁ Λόγος, in the Prologue of John.1 Also at several other points scholars have utilized Philonic material in their interpretation of John, as in their analysis of terms such as “light,” “darkness,” “water,” and “bread,” often emphasizing their symbolic use (C. H. Dodd 1953/65, 54–73).

Philo’s exegetical method and some of his exegetical ideas/traditions have been used to illuminate John’s interpretation of the Old Testament, for example in the analysis of the Discourse on bread from heaven in John 6:31–58, and also in the analysis of John 5:17 where Jewish exegetical debates on Gen 2:2–3 are reflected (P. Borgen 1965/81; B. Lindars 1972, 218–19; C. K. Barrett 1978, 255–56, and P. Borgen 1987a, 12, 70, 85). The present study will demonstrate that Philo’s exegesis of Gen 2:2–3 is of special interest also because it plays a role in a controversy about Sabbath observance within the Alexandrian Jewish community This controversy, moreover, provides an important parallel to the situation of the Johannine community reflected in John 5:1–18.

Before we compare John and Philo, it is necessary to investigate how John uses traditional material and how it reflects the Sabbath controversy in which the Johannine community was involved. Among the relevant

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texts in Philo’s writings, Migr. 89–93 is central for such a comparison. The insights into the situation gained from Philo and reflected in John 5:1–18 contribute to the scholarly discussion on the history of the Johannine community.

The Use of Tradition

In his book Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel, C. H. Dodd demonstrates that John 5:1–9, the healing of the paralytic at Bethsatha, follows the same general pattern as that of several healing stories in the Synoptic Gospels (C. H. Dodd 1963, 174–80). The structure is as follows:

The scene:
Vv. 1-3: . . . there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep gate a pool, in Hebrew called Bethsatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed.

The patient and his condition:
V. 5: One man was there, who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

Intervention by Jesus, leading up to word of healing:
Vv. 6-8: When Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going, another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.”

Recovery of the patient:
V. 9: And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked.

Like some of the healing stories in the Synoptics, this story in John is set on a Sabbath day, “Now that day was the sabbath” (John 5:9. See Mark 3:1–6; Luke 13:10–17).

According to Dodd, the subsequent controversial dialogue, vv. 10 ff., is connected somewhat artificially with the miracle through the reference to the Sabbath in v. 9 (C. H. Dodd 1963, 118). In this way vv. 10–18 serve as the transition from the narrative of the healing at Bethsatha to the discourse which follows in vv. 19 ff. (C. H. Dodd I 1953/65, 320. So also B. Lindars 1972, 52 “a transitional dialogue”).