CHAPTER SIX

JESUS APPEALS TO THE LAW IN DEFENCE OF HIS SABBATH "WORK"—JN 7,21-23.24

A) Jn 7,21-23. The Sabbath work of Jesus fulfills the Law

In analyzing Jn 7,19 we saw that Jn 7,14-24 constitutes a unit divided into three sub-sections (vv. 14-18; 19-20; 21-23) which are interrelated.¹ The question of the relation of Jn 7,14-24 to Jn 5 is considered in detail in the Excursus at the end of this chapter.² What has already been said need not be repeated, but attention will have to be paid to certain points which were not treated exhaustively; other points which were will have to be taken up once again because of the light they cast on Jn 7,21-23.

a) The unity of vv. 21-23

The section is introduced by the words: ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς and is articulated in rigorous logical and literary sequence. Ἐν ἐργον ἐποίησα καὶ πάντες θαυμάζετε (v. 21) and ἔλον ἄνθρωπον ύγιὴ ἐποίησα εἰς σαββάτῳ (v. 23) form an inclusion. The object of the controversy is the Sabbath healing, which is compared and contrasted with the practice of circumcision on the Sabbath, both being considered to be, in different ways, the fulfilment of the Mosaic Law.

The unity is underlined by the termini: ἐργον ἐποίησα (ἐν σαββάτῳ) ... Μωϋσῆς ... περιτομή ... Μωϋσῆς ... ἐν σαββάτῳ περιτέμνετε ἄνθρωπον ... περιτομήν λαμβάνει ἄνθρωπος ἐν σαββάτῳ ... ὁ νόμος Μωϋσέως ... ἄνθρωπον ύγιὴ ἐποίησα ἐν σαββάτῳ.

b) Jn 5 as the key to Jn 7,21-23

In the Excursus devoted to the connection between Jn 7,14-24 and Jn 5, we refuse to adopt the view of those who would change the present order of the text and have our section follow immediately

¹ See above, pp. 87f; 130ff and below, pp. 166-168.
² See below, pp. 169ff.
upon chapter 5. Nevertheless, we agree that Jn 7,21-23 refers to the healing related in Jn 5,1-14 and, consequently, that 7,21-23 constitutes the continuation of the Sabbath controversy which followed upon the healing of the paralytic (Jn 5,15ff).

In our exegesis of Jn 5,1-18 we insisted that Jn found the traditional healing pericope congenial to his own thought and incorporated it into his Gospel because it presented Jesus (or was apt to be so interpreted) as the giver of life. By having the healing take place on the Sabbath, Jn succeeded in bringing out the symbolical value of the healing even more clearly.

The connection of Jesus' Sabbath work with the gift of life is also evidenced by Jn 9.4 Whatever position is adopted concerning the baptismal background, 9,35-41 leaves no doubt about the intention of the evangelist: the blind man makes an act of faith in Jesus; the sin of the Pharisees remains. Jn explicitly affirms elsewhere that the gift of life is the outcome of faith in Jesus5 and that the lack of belief on him means to remain in sin and to die (perish).6 What the blind man receives is more than physical sight, it is life.

The ἐργα τοῦ θεοῦ Jesus works on the Sabbath (healing of the paralytic, healing of the man born blind) are concrete realizations of the one ἐργαν: ζωοποιεῖν.

The reply of Jesus to the accusation made against him of violating the Sabbath at 5,17 discloses the true nature and significance of his Sabbath ἐργαν by characterizing it as ζωοποιήσεις.7 If we follow Cullmann,8 the words also indicate that Jesus' Sabbath "work" puts an end to the Sabbath by fulfilling it. The ἕως ἐργα points to a time when Jesus (and the Father) will no longer "work", at least not in the same manner in which Jesus (in unity with the Father) "works" during his earthly ministry.9

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3 See above, pp. 12ff.
4 See the section on Jn 9, esp. p. 26 and nn. 57-58.
5 Cf. Jn 3,15.16.36; 5,24.40; 6,40.47; 10,10; etc.
7 The Sabbath "work" of Jesus, his σημεῖον (vs. Bultmann, 208, n. 8), is the result of Jesus' unity of action with the Father (v. 17) in giving life and judging (vv. 19ff).
9 Thüsing (Erhöhung, 72) has shown that the "work" of Jesus truly begins with his "exaltation", but that this moment marks the end of the first stage of his "work": his "Offenbarungswirken". Jn 17,4 means that "sowohl die Liebe und der Gehorsam einerseits als auch die Offenbarung andererseits zur Vollkommenheit geführt sind"