

**ARISTOBULUS' INTERPRETATION OF LXX
SABBATH TEXTS AS AN INTERPRETATIVE
KEY TO JOHN 5:1-18**

G. SWART

INTRODUCTION

Taken at face value, the healing of the lame man at Bethesda (John 5:1-18) seems to have offended the Jewish authorities mainly because of the healed man's violation of the sabbath. In verse 18, however, the reader learns that their hostility toward Jesus was exacerbated by his response (John 5:17) to the charges of sabbath violation with which they confronted him.¹ At this point, their accusations are explicitly formulated by the evangelist: "not only was he breaking the sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18 NIV).

The Greek text of verse 18 poses certain difficulties: Although the introductory formula indicates a binary syntactic structure ("not only ... but even ..."), the sentence actually consists of three units: οὐ μόνον ἔλυεν τὸ σάββατον (A) ἀλλὰ καὶ πατέρα ἴδιον ἔλεγεν τὸν θεόν (B) ἴσον ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ (C). Translators and commentators differ in their interpretation of the mutual relations between the charges:

- i. not only A, but also B and C (3 separate charges)²

¹ There is no explicit indication of a formal lawsuit at this point in the narrative – a fact noticed by several scholars. Bianca Lataire, for instance, speaks only of the "motives" of Jesus' Jewish opponents "for seeking all the more to kill him"; see Lataire 2000:177; and M. Asiedu-Peprah views the Johannine conflict narratives (John 5:1-4; 9:1-10:21) not as trials, but as instances of a bi-lateral juridical sabbath controversy (Asiedu-Peprah 2001, ch. 1). The use of the term "charges" in this essay merely reflects the fact that the text seems to imply an intended formal trial based on these accusations.

² So du Rand (Verklarende Bybel (1983-vertaling), 1989:119): "Hulle beskuldig Jesus nie net daarvan dat Hy God *sy eie Vader* noem nie, maar dat Hy Hom ook met God *gelyk gestel* het...". By presenting B and C in a "not only ... but even ..." syntactic construction, Du Rand seems to indicate that he regards B and C also as semantically co-ordinated.

- ii. not only A, but also B – thus C (2 charges + characterisation of the 2nd – with “calling God his own Father” understood as “making himself equal with God” in the sense of claiming divine sonship, and thus, divinity or Wesensgleichheit)³
- iii. not only A, but also B – thus C (again: 2 charges + characterisation – but the characterisation is understood to encompass both the perceived sabbath violation and Jesus’ claim to be working in the same way that God is working)⁴
- iv. not only A, but also B, yet at the same time C (with the participial clause [C] understood as modifyng [B] in a concessive sense: “He claimed that God was his Father, yet at the same time made himself equal with God.”)⁵

Of the interpretations listed above, (ii) and possibly (iv) seem to have the best linguistic support, while (i) and (iii) seem at odds with the syntax of the Greek text.⁶

Scholarly attempts to understand the verse have gone beyond the immediate context, and include the search for extra-biblical parallels – especially in the rabbinic midrashim⁷ and in the works of Philo of

³ Bauer (1912:56). See also Maier (1984:210): “weil er nicht allein den Sabbat auflöste, sondern auch Gott seinen Vater nannte und damit sich selbst Gott gleich machte“ (author’s emphasis); Kysar (1986:79); van Houwelingen (1997:134); Beasley-Murray (1999:74). This interpretation seems to be reflected in translations such as the 1983 Afrikaans Nuwe Vertaling: “Hy het nie net *die sabbatdag ontheilig* nie, maar God ook *sy eie Vader* genoem en Hom so met God *gelyk gestel*” (author’s emphasis).

⁴ See Zahn (1912/1983:291); Brown (1971:213-214). Jesus’ claim in v. 17, κἀγὼ ἐργάζομαι, is seen by these interpreters as the real basis for the accusation that he is claiming equality with God.

⁵ McGrath (1998:472). McGrath follows Odeberg’s interpretation, namely, that in terms of the values of first-century Mediterranean cultures, Jesus’ actions would be regarded as insubordination and as contradicting his claim to sonship.

⁶ See Zahn (1912/1983:291).

⁷ *Exodus Rabbah* 30:9 and *Genesis Rabbah* 11:8c-10. With regard to the latter, see Beasley-Murray (199:74): “The Jews understood Gen 2:2 as implying that God’s sabbath following creation continues to the present – his works are finished. But ... how can God be said ... to be active, if he keeps sabbath? One answer ran: God rested from work on the world, but not from his work on the godless and the righteous.” See also Strack and Billerbeck (1989, Vol. 2:461-462).

Alexandria.⁸ Objections that may be raised against these parallels are, (i) that the rabbinic literature is not contemporaneous with John's gospel – in fact it can not be proven that ideas expressed by them have indeed been in circulation at the time of origin of the fourth gospel;⁹ and (ii) that Philo introduces issues such as the creation of divine creatures, which do not feature at all in the narrative of John 5.

The aim of the present study is to examine some alternative parallels – notably the fragments of the second century B.C.E. Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Aristobulus, preserved in Book XIII.12 of the *Praeparatio Evangelica* by Eusebius of Caesarea¹⁰ – to see whether these may in any way inform the interpretation of John 5:18. The Aristobulus fragments have in fact been cited as parallels to John 5:17.18 by a few scholars;¹¹ however, no study I was able to access includes a detailed discussion of what these parallel texts specifically contribute to our understanding of the argument in John 5 or of the underlying assumptions.

HYPOTHESIS

As a working hypothesis, the following claims will guide our discussion: (i) The fragments of Aristobulus provide a conceptual framework that aids the reader in understanding the thrust of the evangelist's argument in John 5:1-18; and (ii) Aristobulus' motivation of the sabbath law reflects his particular understanding of the LXX version of biblical sabbath texts.

LXX SABBATH TEXTS

The biblical texts to which Aristobulus evidently alludes in this fragment (see

⁸ Philo, *Legum allegoriae* I,5. See Borgen (1991:209-221).

⁹ See Bryan (2003:19).

¹⁰ Critical edition of the text: Eusèbe de Césarée, *La Préparation Evangélique*, Livres XII–XIII: Introduction, texte Grec, traduction et annotation par E. des Places, SC 307, 1983.

¹¹ See, for instance, Schnelle (1998:105, n. 21).

the discussion below) are the following:

- i. Genesis 2:2, 3 – God “rested” (κατέπαυσεν) from all the work of creating that he had done;
- ii. Exodus 20:10, 11 – man must abstain from labour (οὐ ποιήσεις ... πᾶν ἔργον) on the seventh day, because God “rested” (κατέπαυσεν) on that day;
- iii. Deut 5:14 – the commandment is extended to all under the care of the addressed, so that man and beast may rest (ἵνα ἀναπαύσῃται).

When the terms used in the LXX version of these texts are compared to the Hebrew terms, the following pattern emerges: the repeated κατέπαυσεν in Gen 2:2, 3 reflect *וַיָּשָׁב* and *שָׁב* respectively; while the same term, κατέπαυσεν, in Ex 20:11 represents *נָח* in the Hebrew; and ἵνα ἀναπαύσῃται in Deut 5:14 represents the Hebrew phrase *למנוח ינוח*.

A preliminary conclusion to be drawn from this comparison is that the Hebrew texts apply the different terms indiscriminately, while the LXX translators distinguish between God’s “rest” (for which the term καταπαύω is used) and man’s rest (for which ἀναπαύομαι is used).

ARISTOBULUS – SABBATH AND CREATION

The fragments give ample evidence that Aristobulus was consciously and intentionally interpreting the Scriptures for his non-Jewish readers.¹² His interpretation of the term “sabbath”, however, is almost appended as an afterthought: “The fact that this [seventh] day is called sabbath is understood as it being a [day of] rest” (τὸ δὲ σάββατον αὐτὴν προσαγορεύεσθαι διερμηνεύεται ἀνάπαυσις οὖσα: ... – *PrEv* 13.12.13).¹³

¹² Cf. *PrEv* 13.12.3; 13.12.11, where he corrects what he regards as a false interpretation of Ex 20:11 by some people (τινέες). According to Clement of Alexandria (whose quotations from Aristobulus are preserved by Eusebius), Aristobulus aimed “to bring the Peripatetic philosophy out of the law of Moses and out of the other prophets.”

¹³ For an English translation of the fragments, see Collins (1985:831-842); for a French translation, see *Des Places, PrEv XII–XIII*. The translation of the sections quoted in this study is the author’s own.

At the beginning of fragment 5 he motivates the institution of the sabbath in terms of man's need to rest: "God ... gave us as a [day of] rest, because of the fact that life is troublesome for all,¹⁴ the seventh day ..." (ὁ θεὸς ... δέδωκεν ἀνάπαυσιν ἡμῖν διὰ τὸ κακόπαθον εἶναι πᾶσι τὴν βιοτήν, ἑβδόμην ἡμέραν – *PrEv* 13.12.9).

But Aristobulus also links the origin of the sabbath to creation: "God created the whole universe and gave us as a [day of] rest ... the seventh day" (ὁ θεὸς τὸν ὅλον κόσμον κατεσκεύακε καὶ δέδωκεν ἀνάπαυσιν ἡμῖν ... ἑβδόμην ἡμέραν – *PrEv* 13.12.9). He is probably alluding to Ex 20:11, where the institution of the sabbath is explicitly linked to the order of creation. Note, however, that the term ἀνάπαυσις ("rest") rather reflects ἵνα ἀναπαύσῃται in Deut 5:14 LXX, where the sabbath commandment is motivated in terms of the need that both man and other creatures have to rest. Thus Aristobulus seems to draw a careful distinction: man rests (ἀναπαύομαι) or is given a day of rest (ἀνάπαυσις); but with God as subject, he only uses the terms ἀποπεπαυκέναι and καταπεπαυκέναι. These terms reflect κατέπαυσεν (Gen 2:2, 3; Ex 20:11 LXX). This distinction, then, is made along the same lines as that found in the Septuagint version, as discussed above.

What precisely does Aristobulus mean by ἀποπαύω and καταπαύω? Not inactivity, as he is at pains to explain: "What is made clear in the law, namely that God 'rested' on that [day], this does not mean – as some people hold – that God was not doing anything any more ..." (Τὸ δὲ διασαφούμενον διὰ τῆς νομοθεσίας ἀποπεπαυκέναι τὸν θεὸν ἐν αὐτῇ, τοῦτο οὐχ, ὡς τινες ὑπολαμβάνουσι, μηκέτι ποιεῖν τι τὸν θεὸν καθέστηκεν, ... – *PrEv* 13.12.11a).

If not inactivity, what then? – establishing and preserving the order of creation. Aristobulus continues, "But [it means] that, upon completing the order of things, [God] established it in this way for all times. ... for having established order, he preserves and keeps it so" (... ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τῷ

¹⁴ From this his original readers may have inferred that God, being impervious to suffering, needs no sabbath's rest – but I will argue below that this inference does not feature in the way John portrays Jesus' attitude towards the sabbath.

καταπεπαυκέναι τὴν τάξιν αὐτῶν οὕτως εἰς πάντα τὸν χρόνον τεταχέναι. ... τάξας γὰρ οὕτως αὐτὰ συνέχει καὶ μεταποιεῖ. – *PrEv* 13.12.11b, 12).

According to Aristobulus, then, God did indeed “rest” on the seventh day; but this “rest” is different from the regular and intermittent rest granted to man in consideration of his natural needs. God’s “rest” is understood by Aristobulus as continuous active involvement in the preservation of the created and ordered universe.

ARISTOBULUS – GOD’S WORDS AND CREATION

In the fourth fragment preserved by Eusebius, Aristobulus said: “the voice of God is not to be understood as spoken words, but as the establishment of deeds” (Δεῖ γὰρ λαμβάνειν τὴν θεῖαν φωνὴν οὐ ῥητὸνλόγον ἀλλ’ ἔργων κατασκευάς – *PrEv* 13.12.3a). He supported this assertion by referring to “Moses”, who “called the whole creation of the world ‘words of God’” (ὅλην τὴν γένεσιν τοῦ κόσμου θεοῦ λόγους εἶρηκεν ὁ Μωσῆς – *PrEv* 13.12.3b).¹⁵ The famous ancient Greek philosophers (Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato), he claimed, held similar views, “saying that they heard the voice of God while carefully contemplating that the creation of the universe occurred and was continually kept intact by divine agency” (λέγοντες ἀκούειν φωνῆς θεοῦ, τὴν κατασκευὴν τῶν ὄλων συνθεωροῦντες ἀκριβῶς ὑπὸ θεοῦ γεγонуῖαν καὶ συνεχομένην ἀδιαλείπτως – *PrEv* 13.12.4).

Aristobulus was evidently constructing an apology to counter the attacks of outsiders (Hellenistic gentiles, who would consider it an absurd idea that man could sensorily perceive divine communication); but his appeal to a common manner of expression presupposes general agreement that the capacity to initiate events of the magnitude of cosmic creation by means of mere words was exclusively a divine attribute. As will be illustrated below, this notion plays a

¹⁵ It is clear that Aristobulus has Gen 1 in mind here, because he adds the explanation: “... for <Moses> constantly says of every instance, ‘and God spoke, and it happened’ ”. (καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἐγένετο).

key role in John's portrayal of his hero in John 5:1-18.

The care with which Aristobulus constructed his argument may be seen in his ordered parallel and chiasmic patterns; for instance:

Aristobulus: τὴν θεῖαν φωνήν – ἔργων κατασκευάς (*PrEv* 13.12.3a)

“Moses”: τὴν γένεσιν τοῦ κόσμου – θεοῦ λόγους (*PrEv* 13.12.3b)

Philosophers: φωνῆς θεοῦ – τὴν κατασκευὴν τῶν ὅλων (*PrEv* 13.12.4)

In this sequence, phrases referring to the words/voice of God are constantly varied in such a way that thematic cohesion is attained without verbatim repetition. At the first occurrence, the adjective θεῖαν qualifies φωνήν; then the qualifying genitive θεοῦ is used with λόγους; and finally the genitive θεοῦ is used again, but now with φωνῆς, and in an inverted order. Similarly, phrases referring to creation are varied lexically (κατασκευάς/γένεσιν/κατασκευὴν and ἔργων/κόσμου/τῶν ὅλων) as well as in terms of word order (AB-BA-BA). The order of occurrence of phrases referring to God's words (A) and the creation of the world (B), respectively, is also varied (AB-BA-AB).

By these means, and by his careful choice of words, Aristobulus forged links between sections of his argument that greatly enhanced its persuasive effect.¹⁶ A particular instance is the phrase τὴν κατασκευὴν τῶν ὅλων (*PrEv* 13.12.4). It is not only connected to ὅλην τὴν γένεσιν τοῦ κόσμου (*PrEv* 13.12.3b), as shown above, but is also recalled in τὸν ὅλον κόσμον κατεσκεύακε (*PrEv* 13.12.9). The latter passage firmly links the origin and motivation of the sabbath to God's creation of the universe (understood by Aristobulus as having occurred by the power of God's words); and it is

¹⁶ It may be noted that this assessment of Aristobulus' style contradicts the remarks of Gottheil and Wendl (<http://jewishencyclopedia.com>): “The desultory style of the work of Aristobulus, and the intentionally obscure and mystical mode of expression, offer considerable difficulty to the reader. This is not to be attributed to those who quote from it, but to the author himself, and has frequently led to grave misconceptions.”

precisely the combined occurrence of these concepts in John 5:1-18 that points to the probable relevance of the Aristobulus fragments for the interpretation of this Johannine narrative.

JOHN 5 – THE ESSENCE OF JESUS’ OFFENCE

In the fourth gospel, the sabbath motif proves to be the decisive factor that brings about progression from a simple conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities (John 2:15-18) to a “major juridical conflict” (John 5:11-14; 9:16). Therefore, the sabbath motif is “crucial for the correct understanding of the narrative in John 5:1-47”.¹⁷

In the synoptic narratives involving sabbath controversies, Jesus’ attitude toward the sabbath is explicitly formulated, mostly in words presented as his own – cf. “the Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath” (Mt 12:8 and parallels) and “the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mk 2:27). In John, however, Jesus answers the Jewish authorities’ first accusation of sabbath violation in a different way: “My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται καὶ γὰρ ἐργάζομαι: John 5:17, NIV).

The essential concerns are thus not as explicitly formulated in John as they are in the synoptics. In contrast, John presents the pivotal issues of his narrative by (a) careful structuring of the narrative, and (b) subtle intertextual allusion, both by his own words as narrator and by the words he puts in the mouths of his characters.

Keeping these remarks in mind, the following analysis of the narrative in John 5 is aimed at answering the question: what is Jesus portrayed as actually having done on that sabbath?

On the macrostructural level, the narrative rapidly moves from the first encounter between Jesus and the lame man at the pool – “scene 1” – to another between the healed man and the Jews at an unidentified location – “scene 2” –

¹⁷ Asiedu-Pepurah (2001:42).

to another between Jesus and the healed man at the temple – “scene 3” – to a second between the man and the Jews – “scene 4” – to the eventual confrontation between the Jews and Jesus – “scene 5”.

Taking microstructural elements into consideration, we notice that cohesion is effected by the repetition – almost to the point of seeming redundant – of Jesus' words, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk”. Note, however, that only the second and third items in this triad are constantly repeated, while the first is replaced (and, notably, even anticipated) by terms of healing:

Scene 1:

v. 6 θέλεις ύγιής γενέσθαι;

v. 8 ἔγειρε ἄρον τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ περιπάτει.

v.9 ἐγένετο ύγιής ... καὶ ἦρεν τὸν κράβαττον αὐτοῦ καὶ περιπάτει.

Scene 2:

v. 10 ἔλεγον οὖν ... τῷ τεθεραπευμένῳ· οὐκ ἔξεστίν σοι ἄραι ...

v. 11 ὁ ποιήσας με ύγιῆ ἐκείνός μοι εἶπεν· ἄρον ... καὶ περιπάτει.

v. 12 τίς ἐστὶν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ὁ εἰπὼν σοι· ἄρον καὶ περιπάτει;

v. 13 ὁ δὲ ἰαθεὶς οὐκ ᾔδει τίς ἐστίν, ...

Scene 3:

v. 14 ἴδε ύγιής γεγόνας, ...

Scene 4:

v. 15 ἀνήγγειλεν ... ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ ποιήσας αὐτὸν ύγιῆ.

A. “*being healed*” –

From the mouth of Jesus we hear the question “Do you want to get well?” (v. 6) and afterwards the reminder “See, you are well again” (v.14); but the actual event of the healing is passed over in silence, except for the command “Get up!” (v. 8). From the narrator we hear an announcement, “at once the man got well” (v. 9),¹⁸ plus two references to the man as the one “who had been healed” (v. 10) and “who was healed” (v. 13). The last time the narrator mentions this man is by way of reported speech; he informs the reader that “the man announced to

¹⁸ The clause εὐθέως ἐγένετο ύγιής strictly does not mean “at once he was cured”, as it is translated in the NIV.

the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well” (v. 15) – a verbal echo of “the man who made me well ...” (v. 11).

It is almost as if three different testimonies are being given: (i) Jesus does not make much of his own involvement as healer, and only utters one imperative that presents the healing as *fait accompli*; (ii) the beneficiary of the miraculous healing explicitly identifies Jesus as the healer; and (iii) the narrator subtly shifts from representing Jesus’ position to representing that of the healed man – from “the man got well” to “it is Jesus who had made him well”.

B. “*picking up*” –

In all references to the man “picking up” and “carrying” his mat, only one Greek verb – ἀΐρω – is repeatedly used. These references tend to divert attention from the healing to the violation of the sabbath. When Jesus is finally identified to the Jewish authorities, it is as the healer, not as the instigator of unlawful behaviour. The “Jews” disregard this cue, though, and the reader is led to infer that their agenda is to concentrate on the issue of sabbath violation – but we will return to this aspect in a moment.

C. “*walking*” –

The word for “walking” – περιπατέω – occurs in association with ἀΐρω, but is repeated only four times, against the five occurrences of the latter; thus the emphasis on a crucial element of sabbath observation, the prohibition on carrying anything on the sabbath, is retained. In this way the Jewish authorities’ perspective on the Bethesda episode is developed as yet another thread in the texture of the narrative.

By this carefully constructed narrative John has set the stage for the inevitable confrontation between Jesus and “the Jews”.

Their first formulation of the grounds for prosecution is somewhat vague: “because he was doing these things on the sabbath” (ὅτι ταῦτα ἐποίει ἐν σαββάτῳ – v. 16). The reader is not entirely sure whether the healing, or the command to the cured man to carry his mat, or both, is meant.¹⁹ What is more,

¹⁹ The author can not fully agree with Schnelle (1998:105): “Plötzlich erscheint nicht

Jesus' response does little to clarify the issue: "My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται καὶ γὰρ ἐργάζομαι; v. 17).

From the Jewish perspective, this response amounts to an admission of guilt – and the guilt is even aggravated by an arrogant claim to be the own son of God. From the narrator's perspective, however, a different light is cast on the issues at stake.

Firstly, that Jesus refers to God when saying "my father" is presented as an inference of the accusers. That every reader will make the very same inference is undoubtedly true, but not to the point. The real point to be noted is that John portrays the "Jews" as biased and vindictive, while in effect allowing them to formulate what he wants to say about his hero.²⁰

Secondly, when Jesus says: ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται καὶ γὰρ ἐργάζομαι,²¹ the reader is invited to recall that he actually did no "work" at the pool. He merely spoke, and the man was healed. This seems to be the real point made by the way John tells his story: What the opponents take to be arrogant and blasphemous claims by Jesus, are, ironically, true illustrations of his real identity – a point better taken if the reader catches the subtle allusion to δεῖ γὰρ λαμβάνειν τὴν θεῖαν φωνὴν οὐ ῥητὸν λόγον ἀλλ' ἔργων κατασκευάς (Aristobulus fr. 4).

In sum, then: John (as narrator) does not explicitly say that Jesus healed the man at the pool; nor that he called God his own father; nor that he made himself equal to God. He seems to present the Jewish authorities' formulation of their case against Jesus as shaky, while letting his readers see that each of the charges is actually true. Ironically,²² the unfounded inferences of Jesus' opponents

mehr das Verhalten des Geheilten, sondern die Wundertat selbst als Sabbatbruch."

²⁰ Commentators differ in their interpretation of this passage. Some, e.g., Dietzfelbinger (2001:194), also Beasley-Murray (1999:74, following Bultmann) say the Jews have correctly understood the implication; while others, like Raymond E. Brown (1971:214) insist that the New Testament view of the relationship between Jesus and the Father is "primarily from the viewpoint of the humanity of the Son."

²¹ The term ἐργάζομαι – especially in its proximity to ταῦτα ἐποίησεν ἐν σαββάτῳ – is a striking allusion to Ex 20:10 LXX: οὐ ποιήσεις ἐν αὐτῇ πᾶν ἔργον.

²² Cf. Kysar (1989:79): "Jesus has said nothing that claims an equality with God, and

underscore the truth of the message John wants to convey to his readers.

POINTS OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN ARISTOBULUS AND JOHN

As illustrated above, the fragments of Aristobulus presuppose a general conviction that God (or the “divine power”, to use the Hellenistic philosophical term that Aristobulus ascribes to Orpheus)²³ is capable of effecting cosmic events by a mere word. Fragment 5 also presents God as standing in a different relation to the sabbath from man, for whose benefit it has been ordained as a day of rest. On the seventh day God brought to completion (καταπαύω) the creation and ordering of the universe, but did not “rest” (ἀναπαύομαι) in the sense of ceasing all activity. On the contrary, God’s “rest” is understood as continuous active involvement in the preservation of the created and ordered universe. The Aristobulus fragments thus present a distinction between God’s “rest” and man’s rest – a distinction carefully maintained by the use and definition of the terms employed; and, notably, a distinction along the same lines as that found in the Septuagint (not the Hebrew) version of the texts to which the fragments allude.

Similarly, John 5:1-18 presents Jesus as effecting a miraculous healing by merely uttering a word (the command ἔγειρε), and as “doing these things” on the sabbath. The carefully structured narrative portrays the Jewish authorities as focusing their attention on the perceived violation of the sabbath, while ignoring the clear implications that the healing has regarding Jesus’ identity as divine son of God. Ironically, their inference about his “making himself equal to God” explicitly formulates the central point of the Bethesda episode: Jesus’ actions and conduct with regard to the sabbath illustrate his divinity.²⁴ Readers of the

the authorities have read that into his words. The irony is that Jesus is indeed an equal to the Father, something the readers know but the authorities do not.”

²³ Eusebius, *PrEv* 13.12.4b.

²⁴ Bryan (2003:8) also sees the healing of the man on the sabbath as “a sign of the unity between the actions of the Son and the Father, an idea central to the following discourse”; and he also bases his argument on notions shared between the

gospel, one may assume, were expected to catch this point – and would, quite likely, if they shared the same notions that underlie both the Johannine narrative and the fragments of Aristobulus discussed in this study.

CONCLUSION

It is true that John 5:1-18 contains no explicit allusion to Aristobulus; however, in terms of the conceptual framework underlying the fragments quoted in this study – the connection between sabbath and creation, and between God's words and (creative) actions – John may be appealing to shared notions that would inform his readers' interpretation of his essential message. The fragments of Aristobulus have at least as strong a claim to be considered as parallels to John 5:17.18 as the rabbinic and Philonic parallels often cited by commentators.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Asiedu-Pepurah, M 2001. *Johannine sabbath conflicts as juridical controversy*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Bauer, W 1912. *Johannes*. HNT 2/2. Tuebingen: Mohr.
- Beasley-Murray, G R 1999. *John*. WBC. Waco: Word Books.
- Borgen, P 1991. The sabbath controversy in John 5:1-18 and analogous controversy reflected in Philo's writings, in Runia, Hay & Winston 1991:209-221.
- Brown, R E 1971. *The Gospel according to John*. AB 29. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Bryan, S M 2003. Power in the pool: the healing of the man at Bethesda and Jesus' violation of the sabbath (Jn. 5:1-18), *Tyndale Bulletin* 54/2:7-22
- Charlesworth, J H (ed.) 1985. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Collins, A Y 1985. Aristobulus. A new translation and introduction, in Charlesworth 1985:831–842.
- Dietzfelbinger, C 2001. *Das Evangelium nach Johannes, Teilband 1: Johannes 1-12*. ZB. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.

participants in the narrative. In Bryan's view, however, these shared notions include the lame man's magical understanding of the operation of power in the waters of Bethesda, and the way the text correlates this with the Jews' view of Jesus' power. He notes that the Jews "[N]owhere ... dispute that the power for the healing performed by Jesus had come from God" (2003:14), but regards the central issue to be "the legitimacy of using power from God on the sabbath" (2003:15).

- Gottheil, R & Wendland, P 2007. Aristobulus of Paneas, in Jewish Encyclopedia (online version, <http://jewishencyclopedia.com>, accessed 24/02/ 2007)
- Kysar, R 1986. *John*. Augsburg Commentary on the NT. Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- Lataire, B 2000. Jesus' equality with God: A critical reflection on John 5:18, in Merrigan & Haers 2000:177-190.
- Maier, G 1984. *Johnannes-Evangelium*. Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler.
- McGrath, J F 1998. A rebellious son? Hugo Odeberg and the interpretation of John 5.18, *NTS* 44:470-473.
- Merrigan, T & Haers, J (eds.) 2000. *The myriad Christ: plurality and the quest for unity in contemporary Christology*. Leeuven: University Press.
- Runia, D T, Hay, D M & Winston, D (eds.) 1991. *Heirs of the Septuagint: Philo, Hellenistic Judaism, and early Christianity: FS for Earle Hilgert*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Schnelle, U 1998. *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Strack, H L, Billerbeck, P 1989. *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*. München: Beck.
- Van Houwelingen, P H R 1997. *Johnannes: Het evangelie van het Woord*. Kampen: Kok.
- Zahn, T. *Das Evangelium des Johannes*. Leipzig: A. Diechert (rp. 1983).

Gerhard Swart
Department of Ancient Languages
University of Pretoria
Pretoria 0002
South Africa
E-mail: gerhard.swart@up.ac.za