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AN EXPOSITORY STUDY OF ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

(Continued)

Prof. F. F. BRUCE, D.D.

II. Jesus Revealed Himself to the World (John 1:19-12:50)

(c) MINISTRY OF JESUS IN GALILEE, JERUSALEM AND BY THE LAKE

(John 4: 43—6: 71)

(ii) *The Pool of Bethesda* (John 5:1-18)

Ch. 5, v. 9 b—*Now it was the sabbath on that day.*—It is noteworthy that in John's record of Jesus' Jerusalem ministry, as in the Synoptist record of His Galilaean ministry, it is His infringement of the rabbinical interpretation of the sabbath law that first brings Him into serious conflict with the religious authorities (cf. Mark 2:23—3:6, where it is His attitude to the sabbath law, and not the disputes of Mark 2:1-22, that arouses the deadly hostility of His opponents).

v. 10—*So the Jews said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath, and it is not lawful for thee to take up thy bed.*—The 'tradition of the elders' distinguished thirty-nine categories of work which might not be done on the sabbath; the thirty-ninth of these was the carrying of a burden from one dwelling to another. By this standard the man's action in carrying his pallet was a patent violation of the sabbath law.

v. 11—*But he answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.*—The man defended himself against the charge of sabbath-breaking by the plea that he was acting by the command of another. And in fact the lifting of his pallet was one of the conditions for his cure (v. 8). But in his reply there is the implication that one who was able to work such a cure must be possessed of peculiar authority, and that to obey the command of such a person seemed a clear duty. We may compare the words of our Lord in the similar incident recorded by the Synoptic Evangelists, where the power given to the paralytic to rise from his pallet, lift it up and go home is the

outward and visible sign to the bystanders of the Son of Man's authority on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2:10 ff.). In our Lord's view, the sabbath was given to be a blessing and not a burden to men, and it was most worthily kept when the purpose for which God gave it was most actively promoted. For that reason He regarded acts of mercy and healing not as permitted exceptions to the prohibition of work on that day, but as deeds which should be done by preference on that day, because they were so appropriate to its constitution.

v. 12—*They asked him, Who is the man that said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?*—The man's defence did not exonerate him in the eyes of the custodians of the sacred law, but at least it suggested that the primary responsibility for his action lay with the person who had told him to perform it.

v. 13—*But he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place.*—The man evidently did not know so much as his benefactor's name (unlike the blind man in John 9:11). In keeping with His common policy, Jesus shunned publicity for acts of this kind, and the presence of the crowd around the pool of Bethesda made Him disappear as soon as the cure was wrought.

v. 14—*Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing befall thee.*—But a little later, Jesus recognized the man in the temple, and gave him a word of advice, in terms which may suggest that in this case the disability from which he had suffered was the result of his own sin. He should take warning and not repeat the sin, lest something worse happened to him. The 'worse thing' of which he should beware might well be eternal death.

v. 15—*The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus which had made him whole.*—This time the man was able to ascertain his benefactor's name and identity, and so he could now answer the question which 'the Jews' (i.e. the religious leaders) had put to him earlier. Some commentators have denounced his action as ungrateful; others have thought his intention was to

give public credit to one who had done him so much good. But the Evangelist really throws no light on this question; what he is concerned with is not the man's state of mind but the controversy to which his information gave rise.

v. 16—*And for this cause did the Jews persecute Jesus, because he did these things on the sabbath.*—The man might have acted in ignorance of the technicalities of the law, but Jesus, as they very well knew, had acted with full appreciation of the issues involved when He told him to carry his pallet on the sabbath day. Inciting others to break the law (as they understood it) was worse than breaking it oneself. Therefore they launched a campaign against Him, which was not relaxed until, some eighteen months later, they had Him crucified. The Greek verb translated 'persecuted' (*ediōkon*) is in the imperfect tense, denoting continued action.

v. 17—*But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh even until now, and I work.*—When Jesus' attitude to the sabbath was challenged in Galilee, He appealed to the purpose for which the sabbath was given: 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: so that the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath' (Mark 2:27 f.). Here, in Jerusalem, He invokes another principle, and one which exercised the minds of many rabbis. Did God keep His own laws? In particular, did He keep His sabbath law? But how could He, since plainly His providential care over His creation was unceasing? One story tells how, around the time when this Gospel was written, four eminent rabbis visited Rome and were challenged on this very point. By an ingenious argument they maintained that God carried no burden outside the limits of His own dwelling (heaven and earth), and lifted nothing to a height which exceeded His own stature; therefore all that He did fell within their interpretation of what was admissible on the sabbath. Other authorities dealt with the problem without having recourse to such dialectical subtleties. But on one point they were all agreed: God was active all the time, on sabbath days as much as on ordinary days. And our Lord takes up this point, and justifies His action on the ground that He was following the example of His Father in heaven.

v. 18—*For this cause therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only brake the sabbath, but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*—Had He said, 'God works on the sabbath day, and therefore I am free to do so too', His words would have given offence enough to His hearers. But the manner of His reference to God as 'My Father' suggested even more pointedly that He was putting Himself on a level with God. In their synagogue services of prayer and thanksgiving they were accustomed to address God as 'Our Father'; but Jesus appeared to be claiming God as His Father in an exceptional and exclusive sense. To Greeks there would be nothing extraordinary in such a claim; they were accustomed to thinking of certain outstanding men as godlike in the sense that they were endowed with an unusually generous share of the divine nature. But to the Jews the line of demarcation between the divine and the human was strictly drawn; it was unthinkable that anyone should be comparable to God (Isa. 40:25). It was the fatal desire to be like God that had driven Adam from paradise and precipitated the son of the morning from heaven. Yet here was a man whose actions and words implied a trespass beyond the inviolable boundary that separated God from men. That such a man should be alive and at large constituted a danger to the community that tolerated him. Yet the law of blasphemy was so strictly defined that it would be difficult to prove in court that Jesus' words constituted blasphemy within the meaning of their definition. But if they could, by further debate, draw Him on to the point where He used language which did amount to technical blasphemy, they would gain their end and convict Him on a capital charge.

iii. The Father and the Son (John 5: 19-47)

v. 19—*Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father doing: for what things soever he doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner.*—The controversy which arose over the healing of the cripple on the sabbath now opens out into a monologue by our Lord, in which He expands the meaning of His words in v. 17, and shows in which sense He claims to be equal

with God. There is no thought of any independent action on His part: His claims do not contravene the Jewish refusal to countenance a 'second principle' alongside God. The Jewish philosopher Philo might describe the *logos* as a 'second God'; but such language, if taken at its face value, infringes the sovereignty of the one true God. And no such language is used in this Gospel. Jesus is the Son in a unique sense, to be sure, but as the Son He maintains an attitude of perfect submission to the Father. It is for the Father to initiate; it is for the Son to obey. The activity which originates with the Father is manifested in the Son. And in the following verses two forms of this activity are particularly dwelt upon—the impartation of life and the execution of judgment.

v. 20—*For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth*—This complete unity between the Father and the Son is a unity of perfect love. For the second time in the Gospel we find the affirmation that 'the Father loveth the Son.' On the former occasion, in John 3:35, the verb used was *agapao*; here it is *phileo*. No convincing distinction can be made between the two verbs as thus used. For the reciprocal love of the Son for the Father we may compare John 14:31, where it is this obedient love that leads the Son from the upper room to the garden, and thence to the cross. The Son sees what the Father shows Him, and by His consequent word and action reveals the Father's mind, into which He enjoys such uninhibited insight.

and greater works than these will he shew him, that ye may marvel.—Our Lord's opponents had been scandalized because of a comparatively minor work that He had performed—the healing of a cripple. He justified this action—sabbath day as it was—by an appeal to the example of God: if the Father worked on the sabbath, so must the Son. And now that His defence scandalized them even more than His original action had done, He goes on to assure them that, because He is the Son, He has the authority to carry out much greater works than this, as He perceives the Father's will and gives effect to it. If what He had done already took them by surprise, what they have yet to see will give them real cause for wonder.

(To be continued)