

JOHN 5

Self-Defense of Jesus before His Accusers

John 5 falls within the unit of chapters 5–10, which contains Jesus' three signs and the events that took place during four different feasts of the Jews.

HOLISTIC HEALING GIVEN TO A SICK (5:1–18)

“After this” introduces Jesus' movement from one place to another, not necessarily in chronological order (5:1; cf. 6:1; 7:1). Jesus goes up to Jerusalem for “a feast of the Jews” (5:1). It is puzzling why John did not specify the feast in 5:1, as he does in 6:4; 7:2; and 10:22. Guilding argues that the feast in 5:1 is the feast of the new year.¹ This is probable, for if it meant instead the feast of Tabernacles, John would have mentioned it, as he does in chapter 7. Whatever the name of the feast is, the focus of the story falls on the observance of the Sabbath and Jesus' reinterpretation of the observance by his sign done in Jerusalem.

John introduces a pool called *Bēthzatha* in Hebrew.² The Aramaic name *Bēthesdā* (“house of mercy”) is attested by the second best manuscript and is also relevant to our context.³ It was situated at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem (5:2). Although the Greek version reads “at the sheep,” the context necessitates us to understand it not as “Sheep Pool” but as “Sheep Gate,” located in the northern part of Jerusalem (Neh 3:1, 32; 12:39). Archaeological excavation shows that there were two large pools at the northeast of the temple, built ca. 200 BCE, and other smaller pools in which people could bathe. These two pools had a central partition, which could have been the central portico, and the other four porticoes may denote two on either side of the double pool.⁴ Thus, there were five porticoes in which numerous

1. Guilding 1960: 69–91; cf. Neyrey 2007: 102 n. 133; Fenton 1970: 67.
2. Some ancient manuscripts read *Bēthesda* and others *Bēthsaida*.
3. Köstenberger 2009: 178, 195; cf. Brown 1978: 1.206–7.
4. Lincoln 2006: 193.

Holistic Healing Given to a Sick

invalids such as the blind, lame, and paralyzed used to lie (5:3), because people believed that the water in the double pool had healing power.⁵

Some ancient authorities insert verse 4 after 5:3 to read: “. . . waiting for the moving of the water, 4 for an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” This addition reflects a popular belief at that time and the scribes inserted it to explain 5:7.

There was a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years without having anyone to put him first into the pool before another sick person stepped down into the water ahead of him when it was stirred (5:5, 7). It implies that he was a paralytic or lame and was unable to walk or run. Jesus, who visited the pool on the Sabbath, supernaturally knew that this particular man had been lying there for a long time. He went to the man and asked him, “Do you want to become well?” (5:6b). Jesus’ question shows that he does not do anything against human will. Probably the man got the idea that Jesus would heal him. Therefore he unreservedly told Jesus that there is no one to put him in the pool when the water is troubled and that while he is going another invalid person steps down into it before him. On hearing this Jesus told him, “Rise, take up your pallet and walk” (5:8). Immediately the man became well. He took up his pallet and walked (5:9). This incident reveals that Jesus can change any circumstances for human welfare. John deliberately mentions that that day was the Sabbath (5:9b; cf. 9:14).

His purpose in healing the man on the Sabbath is twofold: first, to fulfill the meaning of Sabbath law as to bring freedom to those who are in physical and social bondage (cf. Deut 5:15); second, by foreknowing the conflict that will arise with the Jewish authorities, Jesus wished to prove his oneness with the Father in work and to initiate the process of going to the cross. After his healing, “the Jews” raised their objection and persecuted Jesus for having worked on the Sabbath (5:16). They even planned to kill him (5:18). This would enable the Son to accomplish God’s redemptive purpose to which the Law points.⁶

“The Jews,” instead of rejoicing over the man who was healed, showed resentment, by quoting the Law, which does not permit anyone to take up the pallet on the Sabbath (5:10). The OT warns that working on the Sabbath

5. At the time of Hadrian (early second century CE), the location of the pools was considered a healing sanctuary dedicated to Asclepius or Serapis; Lincoln 2006: 193.

6. For Jesus’ reinterpretation of Sabbath ethics, see Kanagaraj 2001: 33–60.

day, including collecting sticks and bearing a burden out of one's house, is liable to the death penalty (Exod 31:14–15; Num 15:32–36; Jer 17:21–22; cf. Neh 13:15–22). The concern of the OT is that people should not be engaged in selfish acts on the Sabbath, but should fulfill God's will. However, this meaning of Sabbath was twisted by the rabbis in strict legal terms in their oral law. They prohibited on the Sabbath the work of carrying a load from one domain into another (*m. Šabb.* 7:2; 10:1–5; 11:1–2). Here is a reference to the onerous nomism of Jewish leaders, who were supposed to seek the welfare of the people. Jesus fulfills the inner meaning of the Law by giving freely the divine life (Lev 18:5), which the Law could not give due to human failure to fulfill the Law (cf. Rom 7). Jesus' healing on the Sabbath exemplifies the truth that God, by sending his own Son, did what the Law could not do to enable people to fulfill the Law (Rom 8:3–4).

The healed man understood Jesus only as a respectable person and hence he addressed him as “sir” or “master.” He did not know him as the Son of God who has the power to give life even to the dead (5:19, 21). When the authorities accused the man for having broken the Law, he did not testify to the marvelous way in which he was made well. Instead, the narrative style of John turns to the identity of Jesus—a key feature in John's Gospel! The man testified unknowingly to Jesus by saying, “He who made me well, that man said to me, ‘Take up your pallet and walk’” (5:11). When the authorities enquired him who it was who said so (5:12), the man answered that he did not know who it was (5:13a; cf. 9:24–27), because Jesus remained withdrawn from the festival crowd (5:13b). John's narrative technique of presenting non-understanding in order to make a person understand the identity of Jesus becomes visible. By withdrawing himself, Jesus avoided not only popularity, but especially his arrest and death before the “hour” of the Father.

Jesus later found the man in the temple (5:14a). The healed man, who became a part of God's new society, went to the temple probably to give thanks to God and celebrate the feast with others whom he had probably not seen for years. Jesus revealed himself in the temple as the one who healed him, not only by reminding him of his total healing but also by warning him not to sin any more lest worse thing happens to him (5:14b),⁷ for anyone who sins after receiving God's gift of healing and salvation

7. Not every sickness is due to human sin, but in this man's case probably his long-term illness was connected with his sin.

becomes liable to severe punishment and his guilt remains (cf. 9:41). Thus, Jesus offered the man not only physical healing, but also spiritual welfare.

The man's proclamation of Jesus to "the Jews" (5:15) is often interpreted as an act of betrayal⁸ or as his decision to remain in the old world by joining the enemies of Jesus.⁹ However, the man could have gone to "the Jews" out of his reverence for them and also out of his excitement of having found out the healer. He testified to the love and power of Jesus before the authorities. Otherwise, Jesus' holistic healing and the healed man's participation in temple worship would be meaningless.

Since Jesus did such signs on the Sabbath, "the Jews" continued persecuting him (5:16). Each sign Jesus did was taking him towards the cross through the resultant conflict between him and the authorities. When "the Jews" raised the issue of having healed on the Sabbath, Jesus answered, "My Father is working until now, and I also am working" (5:17). This is the first reference in John's Gospel for Jesus' oneness with the Father in work. True, God rested from all his work of creation (Gen 2:2-3), but this does not mean that he stopped his work of sustaining his creatures (cf. Ps 121:4, 7-8). Referring to the Sabbath, Philo denies that God ever ceased his creative activity (*Leg.* 1.5-6; *Cher.* 87-90). The rabbis believed that because God fills heaven and earth (Jer 23:24) he can do as he wills in the world without breaking the Sabbath law. God is working to give life to people and therefore Jesus, who shares in God's life, cannot stop working to give life to the sick and suffering.

Jesus had addressed God earlier as "my Father" (2:16). He now addresses him again as "my Father," which, for devout Jews, is a blasphemy, for it makes him to be the Son of God and Messiah,¹⁰ claiming thus equality with God. Such a blasphemy deserved the death penalty (19:7). Jesus' work on the Sabbath and his claim to be God's Son kindled the anger of "the Jews" and they sought to kill him (5:17-18). John gives the first reference to Jesus' death by the hands of "the Jews."

THE SON'S AUTHORITY TO GIVE LIFE AND TO JUDGE (5:19-30)

The word "therefore" (*oun* in Greek) in 5:19 links 5:19-47 with 5:17-18. Jesus' defense begins in 5:19 with the "truly, truly, I say to you" formula.

8. Jones 1997: 131-32.

9. Ridderbos 1997: 190.

10. Blomberg 2001: 111.

He affirms the unchangeable truth that he, as the Son of God, cannot do anything by himself except what he sees the Father doing. Here is a picture of an apprentice who copies what his master does.¹¹ Although it appears to be a fitting image, Jesus, unlike an apprentice, works always in unity with the Father in such a way that their works cannot be separated from one another (cf. 5:17; see 1:3 and 8:16 for the corporate work of both Father and Son). Within this unity lies the Son's subordination to and dependence on the Father. The Son does not only the Father's work of healing, but also that of judging (5:22, 30). The Son's act of giving life and rendering judgment is done now (5:21–22, 24) and will also be exercised at the end-time (5:25–29).

The energy behind Jesus' acts is the Father's love for the Son and his demonstration of all his works to him (5:20). Out of his eternal love (17:24), God will show greater works through Jesus than what Jesus had hitherto performed so that those who see them may marvel. These works are: raising the dead at the voice of the Son, and giving them life both now and in future (5:21–29). Not mere works, but the very life of the Son is drawn from God (5:26) and therefore he could raise the dead by his voice and give them life as per his will (5:21, 25). 5:21–24 refers to two kinds of life possible for human beings: receiving divine life that is eternal, or undergoing condemnation under the wrath of God. Anyone who hears Jesus' message of salvation and believes the Father, who sent Jesus, has already passed from the realm of natural life, which leads to eternal death, to the divine realm of life, which leads to eternal life (5:24; cf. 3:16–21). God expects them to hear and obey his words spoken through Jesus and this is how can one observe the Sabbath (cf. Ezek 20:11, 13).

Both giving life and rendering judgment are the whole prerogatives of God. His purpose in entrusting those works to Jesus is that human beings may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him from heaven (5:22–23), because they are one. "Honoring" means worshipping and obeying. Jesus speaks these words to "the Jews" who worship Yahweh as the only God, but reject the one sent by him. Therefore 5:23a has plural subject with the present tense, meaning "as they are honoring the Father." It is impossible to worship the one true God without worshipping and obeying Jesus.

The dual idea of giving life and rendering judgment is repeated in 5:25–29 as eschatological. All those who are in tombs will rise up from

11. Dodd 1968: 30–40.

The Son's Authority to Give Life and to Judge

the dead to be judged at “an hour” of the Father (5:25, 28). The criterion to judge all human beings is “the hour” of Jesus’ death on the cross, which gives choice to people either to accept or reject him. Thus, “an hour” denotes the effects of “the hour” (cf. 2:4). The Son’s judgment has both present and future implications, with an emphasis on future life after death (5:25). “Do not marvel at this” (5:28; cf. 3:7) means that mere emotional amazement cannot lead to eternal life.

In an hour of final resurrection at the voice of the Son of God, those who did good works will inherit divine life and those who did evil will face God’s eternal punishment (John 5:28–29; cf. Dan 12:2; Rom 2:6–11). The term “works” does not mean works of the Law, but works of faith in the crucified Son of Man. The Son will judge with the authority given to him by the Father (5:30; 8:16), because he is the Son of Man (5:27). The Son of God is identified here with the Son of Man (cf. 3:14–16; for the Son of Man as eschatological judge see Matt 25:31–46; *1 En.* 37–71; *T. Abr.* 11–13; *4 Ezra* 11–13). As the Son of Man, Jesus represents both humanity and God (Dan 7:9–27) and salvation comes to humanity through the same Son of Man by his death on the cross. Since salvation is inseparable from judgment, the Son of Man becomes also the agent of God’s judgment.

The Johannine Jesus, who is dependent on the Father, cannot do anything on his own initiative and he judges as he hears from the Father (5:30a). His will to act flows from the Father who sent him (5:21, 30b) and therefore his judgment is right.

FOUR WITNESSES TO JESUS WHO JUDGES THE “JUDGES” (5:31–47)

The Jewish Law demands two or three witnesses to prove any claim of a crime as true (Deut 19:15; cf. Matt 18:16). Jesus is accused by the authorities that he unlawfully works on the Sabbath and that he makes himself equal to God (5:18). But they, who should prove the charges by witnesses, fail to do so. Now, ironically, the accused puts forward four witnesses against his accusers.

By denying that he bears witness to himself, the Son follows the principle that one’s self-witness cannot be accepted as reliable (5:31; cf. 8:13). There is “another,” which denotes the Father (cf. 5:37), who bears witness to Jesus. Since God is true (John 17:3; 1 John 5:20; Rev 3:7), his witness to Jesus is trustworthy (5:32; cf. 8:18).

1. John the Baptist is the first witness to Jesus' rank and status. "You sent to John," recalls the delegation of priests and Levites sent to the Baptist by Jewish authorities (1:19–28). The Baptist categorically denied that he was the Christ and bore witness to the pre-existent Christ. For him, Jesus' rank and status are far greater and earlier than his. Jesus sums up the Baptist's witness as to the "truth" (5:33), referring to his valid message that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God¹² (cf. 1:7–8, 15, 29–36; 3:26–30). However, Jesus cautions his adversaries that he never received the testimony from a human (cf. Gal 1:11–12), but that he only reminds them of the Baptist's witness so that they may be saved (5:34). He also affirms that the Baptist was a "burning and shining lamp" in whose light, however, they were rejoicing for "an hour," i.e., for a time as short as an hour (5:35). The Baptist was "an ordinary portable lamp" who gave light by his witness to the Light. That the Baptist was a lamp may be the fulfillment of Ps 132:17b. "The Jews" believed temporarily that he was the long-awaited Christ and hence they were in "exuberant joy." However, their joy quickly faded away after they understood that he was not the Christ.
2. Jesus' own works given to him by the Father to accomplish testify that the Father has sent Jesus (5:36). That is, the authority to heal the sick flows from God and it cannot be bound by mere legal observance of the Sabbath. Jesus' "works" are doubly emphasized and God's purpose in granting those works is to finish doing them (cf. 4:34; 17:4). The plural "works" implies all forms of Jesus' signs, which eventually led him to the greatest sign of dying on the cross to save humanity. In this sense, the witness of Jesus' works is greater than that of the Baptist.
3. Jesus discloses that "there is another" who bears witness to him (5:32) as "the Father who sent me" (5:37) and himself as the one whom the Father sent (5:38). "Sending" hints at the pre-existence of the Son with the Father and at their mutual knowing due to eternal relationship with one another (7:29; 10:15). Since the Son is from the Father, he alone can reveal the unknowable God to human beings (1:18; 6:46).¹³ Otherwise they can never see God, just as the people of Israel, who never heard God's voice (Deut 5:24–26) nor saw his form (Exod 20:19, 22; Deut 4:15, 33, 36). Moreover, "sending" expresses the Son's

12. Barrett 1978: 264.

13. Haenchen 1962–63: 210; Beasley-Murray 1991: 16–17.

Four Witnesses to Jesus Who Judges the “Judges”

equality with the Father.¹⁴ Therefore the Father bears witness to the Son and attests the signs performed by him on the Sabbath. Jesus accuses his accusers that in spite of all these, they did not believe in the one sent by the Father and therefore that his words were not abiding in them (5:38).

4. The Jewish scriptures, according to Jesus, bear witness to him. The plural “scriptures” indicates various writings in the OT and primarily the five books of the Law (cf. 5:46–47). The Jewish authorities searched the scriptures, as they believed that they have eternal life in them (5:39). The verb “to search” (the scriptures) is a technical term used in first-century Judaism for the study and exposition of the Law (e.g., 1QS 5.11). The Jews believed that the study and interpretation of the scriptures would lead them to the life in the world to come (*Gen Rab.* 1:19). Nevertheless, they have missed out, perhaps due to their legal reading, “the hermeneutical key provided by God’s present revelation” in Jesus.¹⁵ Since the whole of the OT testifies to Jesus (5:46), eternal life is in him. They would receive life if they would come to him, but they were not willing to do so (5:40).

From this point onwards, Jesus accuses his opponents for their selfishness and false belief in Moses. In contrast to them, Jesus does not seek to be honored by human beings (5:41), because God has already granted him the honor that he deserves to receive from humans (5:23). Because of their selfish ambition for glory from one another, they do not seek the glory that comes from the only God (John 5:44; cf. Rom 2:29; 2 Cor 10:18; 1 Thess 2:4). “The only God” would remind the authorities of the Jewish faith in one God whose honor alone matters. Jesus categorically states that it is difficult for them to believe in the one sent by the Father if they seek to receive honor from one another. In fact, “the Jews” do not really love God and hence they do not believe Jesus, who has come from the Father with his authority (5:42–43a). Jesus hypothetically says that if any false prophet who speaks in his own name or falsely in the name of the Lord (cf. Jer 23:25; 29:9, 25, 31; Deut 18:20) comes to them, they will accept him, for both the Jewish leaders and false prophets seek their own honor and gain

14. The halakic principle says, “An agent is like the one who sent him,” in the sense that both are one in will and work (cf. Ashton 1991: 314). However, there is no essential oneness in this principle as we have it in Jesus, God’s agent (cf. 12:44–45).

15. Lincoln 2006: 207.

(5:43b). If they do not believe in Jesus, consequently they will fall prey to lying prophets.¹⁶

Jesus warns his opponents of the forthcoming judgment in which, not Jesus, but Moses himself, in whom they have set their hope, will accuse them of their unbelief in the one sent by their own God (5:45). “Moses” symbolizes here the Law given through him (1:17) and written by him (5:47). In fact, what Moses wrote was a prophecy of the coming of Christ and in this sense, Moses wrote of Jesus (5:46). If they had really believed in the Law that points to Jesus, then they would have accepted him as the Messiah and believed in his words. “His [i.e., Moses’] writings” represents the whole OT, which bears witness to Jesus (5:39). Jesus defends himself that his words are foreshadowed in the OT writings. In Jesus’ attack on his accusers as those who are blind to their own Law, the table is turned: the accused becomes the accuser and the judges are judged in this trial-like scene.¹⁷

16. Cf. Schnackenburg 1980–84: 2.128.

17. Lincoln 2006: 205, 208; Neyrey 2007: 115.