

J. Duncan M. Derrett

Circumcision and Perfection: A Johannine Equation (John 7:22-23)

Professor Derrett continues to shed fresh light on the New Testament from his unrivalled knowledge of Judaism. He last wrote in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY (60:4, 1988, 291-8) on 'The Samaritan Woman's Purity (John 4:4-52)', and he now tackles another Johannine problem.

John puts into Jesus' mouth at Jn. 7:22-23 a curious justification for healing a paralytic on the Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-18). Jesus defends himself against an accusation which figured in his cumulative condemnation by his own nation, leading to his being 'handed-over' to Pilate (Jn. 18:35).¹ Who would have understood that defence? Other arguments are used in the Synoptics to account for his healing the sick on the Sabbath. The logic of the Johannine defence has defeated every commentator. If the *style* of thinking can be clarified we shall certainly know something about John which was not known previously, and, at second hand, about Jesus.

22 Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man upon the Sabbath. 23 If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you incensed with me because on the sabbath I made a man's whole body well (literally, 'I made a whole man well')?

The form of the question, 'Are you . . . ?' is an idiomatic *complaint* (cf. Sir. 28:3-4), and the meaning is 'It is absurd that you . . .'. However, the reasoning in 22-23 does not strike us as persuasive. John has the habit of 'repetition with progression', and we are bound to look backwards and forwards. In ch. 5,

¹ A.E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial. A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London, 1976), 49-52, 76.

where our miracle story was actually told, 'healthy' ('well') appears, emphatically, five times. As a result of our present verses circumcision is linked to 'being well'. Common sense disputes this. And the way circumcision and the Sabbath, the two most notorious signs of Jewry, are brought into confrontation and related to 'making well' eludes us. Knowing John's technique we must look forwards, to trace another key word. 'Whole' (*Gk. holos*) has a further history in John. The Pharisees abuse the man born blind, but wholly illuminated by Jesus, and say he was *wholly* born in sin (Jn. 9:34). Jesus speaks of an ablation which makes a person *wholly* pure at Jn. 13:10. 'Whole' thus carries overtones of perfection, in the sense of completion. We should try to take account of John's use of 'healthy' and 'whole' in both previous and later episodes: this information may help with our conundrum.

Jn. 7:22–23, apparently defying reasoning, does not figure in Leroy's book of Puzzles.² Did John like *non sequiturs*; had they some titillating quality unknown to us? Was John a Jew, even a Palestinian?³ His audience certainly treasured its intellectual stake in Judaism.⁴ Scripture was their heritage (Jn. 2:22, 10:35, 20:9). At Jn. 7:42 some of the crowd cite a midrash on Mi. 5:2 as if it were scripture, and our author knew many readers would side with those who did this. In this instance I shall call scripture to our aid, and traditional Jewish techniques of reasoning, but with a difference. We shall see where scholars have found themselves at a loss, and where a vision of Jesus as an independent thinker may help.

² H. Leroy, *Rätzel und Missverständnis. Ein Beitrag zur Formgeschichte des Johannesevangeliums* (B.B.S. 30: Bonn, 1968).

³ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1968), 78–79; L. Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Exeter, 1969), 218–227.

⁴ J.J. Enz, 'The book of Exodus as a literary type for the gospel of John', *JBL* 76 (1957), 208–215; R.H. Smith, 'Exodus typology in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 81 (1962), 329–342; P. Borgen, 'Observations on the midrashic character of Jn. 6', *ZNW* 54 (1963), 232–240 (reprinted in collections of his articles); *id.*, 'Some Jewish exegetical traditions as background for Son of Man sayings in John's gospel (Jn. 3, 13–14 and context)', in: M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Évangile de Jean. Sources, Rédaction, Théologie* (B.E.T.L. 44: Gembloux and Leuven, 1977), 243–258; G. Richter in: J. Ernst (ed.), *Schriftauslegung* (Munich, 1971), 193–279; M. E. Boismard in: *Fest R. Schnackenburg* (Freiburg, 1974), 160–171, at pp. 168–9; J.D.M. Derrett, 'The Samaritan Woman's purity', *EQ* 60 (1988), 291–298; M.J.J. Menken at *BZ* 32 (1988), 1989–209 and *ETL* 64 (1988), 164–172 deals with John's use of OT quotations. The healing of the paralytic, with its synoptic analogue, contains unexplained curious details: many NT scholars would resist Exodus typology, but I suspect that a careful study of Ex. 21:19 would be propitious.

The Surface of Jn. 7:22–23.

Jesus admits that his miracle was a 'work' (Jn. 7:21), though the modern mind would hesitate. Was that command to carry the bed and walk a 'work' in any sense that we can visualize? The man worked: did Jesus? The latter argues that whatever it was he did it did not breach the Sabbath laws, because of the analogy of circumcision. We shall return to the inference which this suggests. Meanwhile, Moses certainly commanded a 'work' when he conveyed to the people Yahweh's requirements about circumcision. Would it not help us to know what kind of 'work' that was, and why it was instituted? Perhaps that may tell us why it could conceivably justify healing on the Sabbath.

The average person would say that tampering with the male organ, which Philo and Maimonides believed actually impaired its owner's libido, cannot be compared with healing a paralytic. This was admitted long ago.⁵ To uphold the reputation of John he was furnished with arguments he does not utter: (1) circumcision is external, Jesus' cure internal; (2) circumcision is a means, cure of a soul an end (a hopeful idea); (3) circumcision attends to a part, Jesus the whole; (4) circumcision causes pain and loss, Jesus gives health and life; (5) Moses and his Law cannot save, Jesus can.⁶ Love binds at least as well as the commandment to circumcise, and the Sabbath gives no rest from either;⁷ and if Moses was a servant and mouthpiece, Jesus was the master himself (a valid observation, note the characteristic 'you' at v.22).⁸ But surely all these, sound as they are, are *contrasts*, not parallels. Bultmann weakened the comparison still further: Jesus healed only once, the Jews break the Sabbath continually. In this century rabbinical so-called parallels have been ventilated, as we shall see;⁹ but the precise limits of their usefulness have not been

⁵ H. Grotius, M. Polus. Lindars invites us (*John*, 290–1) to question how circumcision is analogous to healing? Hengstenberg (1862) and F.E. Gaebelin (ed.) *Expositor's Bible Commentary* 9 (Grand Rapids, 1981) relate the operation to *purification* (without any authority). W. Barclay, *Gospel of John* 1 (Edinburgh, 1955/1971), 253, compliments Jesus on his argument—making whole has every advantage over a mutilation. A desperate contrast, this, not a parallel.

⁶ These arguments are found in J.A. Bengel, Cornelius à Lapide, H. Hammond, J. Lightfoot.

⁷ T. Scott (ed.), *Holy Bible* (ed. W. Symington, London, [1841]), iii, 217. Zch. 7:9. Lindars, *John*, 292, says *salvation* takes precedence over the route towards it—a prescient exegesis. However, circumcision never claimed to *save*. But it commenced a pilgrimage.

⁸ E. Waitz, 'Zur Erklärung von Joh 7, 22–24', *TSK* 54 (1881), 145–160 at 156–7.

⁹ Below, pp. 219f.

appreciated. Many have actually said that they were irrelevant, without (however) removing them from their notes. They illustrate a rabbinical technique of interpreting *texts*, a department of reasoning, but only one department.

What is one to do with the apparent want of logic at 7:22–23? Matthew Henry (d.1714) made one of the most thoughtful attempts to iron out the crease:¹⁰ (1) circumcision was an innovation,¹¹ while healing existed by the law of nature; (2) circumcision sheds blood, Jesus makes whole; (3) circumcision requires the *healing* of a part cut, the child perhaps being ill in other ways: the soul was unaffected; whereas with his ‘Sin no more’ (Jn. 5:14) Jesus had healed both body and soul. But Henry goes on to something, the source of which he does not divulge: (4) circumcision was intended for the good of the soul, and to make the whole man ‘as it should be, but they had . . . turned it (the rite) into a mere carnal ordinance’.¹² His comment on contemporary Judaism is unwarranted;¹³ but we recognize traces of genuine learning, and hasten to pursue them.

The Content of Jn. 7:23

As Barrett observes¹⁴ and others have noticed since, circumcision was devised to make the male of the chosen people *perfect* (Heb. *šālēm*: Mishnah, Ned. 3:11). But this clue has not been followed up. Jesus attended to biblical history (Mt. 19:4), and here he hints that the requirement that circumcision be performed on the eighth day (Lv. 12:3; Gn. 21:4; Phl. 3:5)¹⁵ developed a rule first found at Gn. 17:10–14. This part of the law, as John reported Jesus’ words, came ‘from the fathers’. Whether or not it was widely believed at John’s day that every part of the so-called ‘oral law’ went back to Moses himself (Mishnah, ‘Ab, 1:1), so much at least of the law of circumcision went back to the patriarchs if any

¹⁰ M. Henry, *Exposition of the New Testament* (London, 1886–8), iv, 321–24.

¹¹ Abel, Enoch, Noah pleased God uncircumcised. I. Ferus, *In sacrosanctum sec. Ioannem evangelium commentaria* (Complutum, 1569), fol. 95r. Justin, *Dial.* 27.

¹² Henry, *Exposition*, iv, 322–3.

¹³ But many will relish (cf. Rm. 10:2) his comment, ‘Hypocrites often cover their real enmity against the power of godliness with a pretended zeal for the form of it’ (*ibid.*, 253).

¹⁴ C.K. Barrett, *Gospel according to St John* (London, 2nd edn., 1978), 319–320.

¹⁵ Jub. 15:11–14 with Charles’ valuable note at R.H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1913/1968), 36.

credence is to be placed in scripture. What Abraham practised anticipated the Mosaic law: including the right and duty of circumcision, in normal cases, to take precedence over the Sabbath rest (Mishnah, Šab. 19:23; Ned. 3:11). We consult Gn. 17:10–14, especially v.12. Jewish tradition, based on that chapter, confirms that circumcision was required for making Abram perfect,¹⁶ Abram whose new name, covenantal status, and fertility, depended upon this painful ceremony. 'I am God Almighty. Walk before me,¹⁷ and be *whole-hearted*.' So runs Gn. 17:1, which propounds the covenant on which the subsequent verses expand. 'Whole-hearted' is the modern (rather cramped) rendering of *tāmîm*, usually translated 'perfect', with the broadest implications, e.g. 'fault-less'.¹⁸ At Gn. 17:3 'Abram fell on his face' because, we are told, he was uncircumcised.¹⁹

Tāmîm is 'unblemished', whether of a work of Yahweh,²⁰ of anything *entire*,²¹ of a person of unblemished character,²² or of an animal without blemish. This is no coincidence since the

¹⁶ Gen. R. 11:6 (Soncino trans, p.84) (Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar* iv/1, 35 (n)). Gen.R. 46:4, 5 (Sonc. trans., pp. 391–2); Tanhuma (Buber), *Lekā* 21; Mishnah, Ned. 3:11; Babylonian Talmud, Ned. 31b (Sonc. trans., p. 93), 32a. Strack-Billerbeck, i, 386 *ad* 5:48. Pirqē de Rabbi Eliezer 29 (ed., trans., G. Friedlander, New York, 4th edn., 1981, 202ff); Pesiqta Rabbati 23:4 (trans. W.G. Braude, Nesikta Rabbati [Y.J.S. 18: New Haven and London, 1968], i. 478–9); Barn. 9:1–5; Odes of Solomon, Ode 11:2–3 (J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* ii [London, 1985], 744; Theodotus (*ib.*, ii. 792); Zohar III. 13b–14a: I Tishby, ed., *The Wisdom of the Zohar* iii (Oxford, 1989), 1182; M.M. Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* 2 (New York, 1955), 226–230; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* III.49 (118a) (trans., S. Pines, Chicago and London, 1963/1974, ii, 609); S.R. Hirsch, *Horeb. A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances* (with full references); *Jüdisches Lexicon* 1, 863; J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (London, 5716/1956), 58; A. Chill, *The Mitzvot. The Commandments and their Rationale* (New York, 1974), 6 (based on the *Hinnuk*).

¹⁷ The root HLK contains *halakha*, legal ethics. Gn. 24:40 Ex. 16:4, 18:20; 1 Sam. 2:30, 35; 2 Kgs 20:3; Is. 2:3; Mi. 6:8; Zch. 3:7, etc. W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch* (Berlin, 1959), s.v. HLK 2. 'Walk' means 'behave': 2 Sam. 22:33; Job 34:8; Ps. 18:20, 32, 107:17–18; 1 Thes. 4:1 Hermas, mand. 8:11.

¹⁸ Cf. Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch*, s.v. vollständig, fehlerfrei, wohlbehalten, vollkommen, schuldlos, treu. Can a word of praise be more comprehensive? For 'wholehearted' see Hertz (above), Kasher (above).

¹⁹ Tg. ps.-Jon., *ibid.* Kasher, *Encyclopedia, ad loc.*

²⁰ Dt. 32:4.

²¹ Jos. 10:13; Jb. 12:4; Ps. 18:24, 26.

²² Gn. 6:9; 2 Sam. 22:24, 26; Ps. 37:18; Ez. 15:5, 28:15. Cf. Tg. ps.-Jon., Lv. 22:27 (Jacob). Babylonian Talmud, Meg. 23a.

animal was offered in sacrifice in lieu of its sacrificer (cf. Mt. 12:5).²³ Abraham must be as 'perfect', without blemish, as an offering (cf. Eph. 1:4, 5:27; Rm. 12:1; 1 Co. 1:18). As Ramban observes, the eighth-day child resembles an offering which must be at least eight days old (Ex. 22:30; Lev. 22:27). No Jewish male is perfect (except in quite marginal cases) without circumcision, the well-known, and very ancient metaphor for perfection.²⁴ Yahweh will 'circumcise' the hearts of the dwellers in the Land so that they will love him with all their hearts and will *live* (Dt. 30:6 MT, Tgg.). It is ridiculous to say that circumcision affects merely the male organ: it was instituted to affect the whole person—it is the seal of the covenant, vaguely analogous to a brand advertising that a slave is a piece of so-and-so's property, only here the relationship was entered into voluntarily.

Bearing in mind the broad potential of *tāmîm*, we turn now to the Aramaic targums. The 'official' targum of Onqelos says 'Be thou ŠLYM (whole)', leaving the implications for Abram/Abraham at large. From Bab. Talm., Zeb. 116a we conclude it meant 'perfect in the ways of life'. 'Walk before me' means 'behave in awareness of me'. Add this moral requirement to the tradition that circumcision was commanded in this verse, and circumcision becomes a moral requirement. Tg. Neofiti, older (in parts) than the Mishnah, says, 'Be thou ŠLM (probably *šālēm* = *šēlîm*) (whole) in good works'.²⁵ The pseudo-Jonathan targum, voicing Jewish tradition, says 'Be thou ŠLYM (*šēlîm*) in thy *flesh*', i.e. circumcised.²⁶ 'Covenant' and 'flesh' are traditionally associated (cf. Gn. 9:16–17). *Šēlîm* (Gk. *teleios*) can be used of perfect conduct (Tg. 2 Sam.22:33),²⁷ but it applies to a person unblemished in *all* respects. *Šēlîm* corresponds to the Heb. *tāmîm*, but it suggests more, as we shall see. *Šēlēmûtâ* means

²³ Unblemished: Ex. 12:5; Lv. 1:3, 10, 3:1, 6, 4:3, 23, 5:15, 9:3, 14:10, 22:19, etc. Ez. 43:23, 25; 55: 18, 23, etc. Lv. 21: 20 is traditionally read with Lv. 22:22 (an example of the canon *binyân 'āv miššēnēy ketûvîm* [below]). The animal deputies for its owner: Ep. Arist. 170; Bab. Talm., Ber. 17a.

²⁴ Ex. 6:12; Lv. 26:41; Dt. 10:16, 30:6; Jr. 4:4, 6:10, 9:25–26 (Bab. Talm., Ned. 31b = Soncino trans., 92); Ez. 44:7, 9; Act. 7:51; cf. Col. 2:13. Ode of Solomon 11:2. Philo, *spec. leg.* 1:6; *Quaest. sol. in Genes.* 3:46, 47, 48 (LCL: Philo, Suppl. 1, ed., trans., R. Marcus, London and Cambridge, 1961, 241, 242, 245–6).

²⁵ Cf. Dt. 18:13 MT, Tg. Neof.

²⁶ E.G. Clarke, *Targum pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch* (Hoboken, 1984), 17.

²⁷ Also Tg. Ps. 18:33, 101:2, 6.

(moral) perfection (Tg. Ps. 15:2); yet that useful root ŠLM²⁸ comprises aspects of *health*.

Enquiring after a person's health one enquires after his *šālôm*. 'Peace' is by no means the chief meaning of that word, but peace with God, one's spiritual health²⁹ must be included. Rabbis can compare³⁰ scholars to the stones of the altar (Dt. 27:6): they must be (in all senses) 'whole before the Lord', as their labours atone for the world. Though both ŠLM and TMM suggest completeness and uprightness, the former, rather than the latter, includes 'health'. Of course physical health was connected with the spiritual condition (Ps. 38:5, 107:17; 1 C. 11:30). The word *šēlîm* encompasses entire health,³¹ entirety,³² sincerity. *Lēv šālēm*, the 'perfect heart', is a biblical cliché (1 Kgs 8:61). We have already noticed that Mishnah, Ned. 3:11 called Abraham *šālēm* ('perfect') after his circumcision. Jn. 7:23 therefore contains a fine pun: *holon anthrōpon hygiē epoiēsa*, 'I have made a whole man whole.' If *holos* and *hygiēs* are two aspects of the same word (Aram.) *šēlîm*, both should be rendered back into Aramaic with the same word, of course recalling the Heb. *tāmîm*. So 7:22–23 is securely linked back to the miracle at ch.5, and the idea of a wholeness, whether of sinfulness or of purity, is developed further later on in the gospel. But how is that cure to be compared with circumcision? *Are they comparable?*

The Implications of Jn. 7:23

Let us consider first implications of substance, and later implications of an intellectual character. Barring marginal exceptions, a Jewish boy is circumcised on his eighth day, even if that is a Sabbath, and since every legal concession should be exercised, the ceremony, without incongruity, takes place before a quorum even in a synagogue. Abraham's 'seed' is thus made

²⁸ J.D.M. Derrett, *Studies in the New Testament* 5 (Leiden, 1989), 145–152. J.L. Ginsberg, 'Peace (Heb. *šālôm*)', *Enc. Jud.* 13 (1971), cols. 194–6, is succinct and excellent.

²⁹ Gesenius, *op. cit.*, s.v. *šālôm* 1 (Heilsein, Wohlbefinden), esp. 1 (h): Is. 48:18, 60:17; Ps. 72:3; 2 Kgs 20:19, etc. Philo uses *hygiainein* of mental and spiritual health: *Eb.* 223; *confus. ling.* 25; *migr.* 119; *quod deus* 119, etc.

³⁰ Tractate Šmāhôt 8 (at the end).

³¹ *Šēlām* is used for *health* at Tg. ps.-Jon. Gn. 43:23, 27 and elsewhere: M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli*. . . (New York, 1950), 1586.

³² Jastrow, 1584, s.v. (1). Biblical Heb. *šālēm* means entire and intact in body and possessions.

perfect before Yahweh. If any means exists whereby a male can be *made* perfect after, or irrespective of, circumcision, Jesus argues, it can claim shelter under this parallel. Yahweh had provided circumcision through Moses to make males perfect. When God acts through the Messiah, the latter's miracles, of which Moses in a sense knew (Jn. 1:45, 5:46), can be said to have been intellectually *prepared for* by circumcision, which loses any emphasis there ever was upon its mechanical aspects as soon as this unexpected light is thrown upon it. The exact reasoning thus becomes very important, and rabbinical parallels, if there are any, must be scrutinized very thoroughly. There is a parallel at Jn. 6:32–35: Moses' gift of manna points to the Bread of Life (Jesus) and is significant only because of the latter. Hence the *dia touto* ('therefore') found at Jn. 7:22, which has embarrassed many,³³ If Jews continue to obey the law (Jn. 7:19) they should admit that they desecrate the Sabbath at circumcision only for an immeasurably high purpose, one verbally, but not actually, derivable from Yahweh's commands to Abraham. Christians will take the point: the Sabbath rest is for that high purpose.

When, at Jn. 5:6, Jesus asks the sufferer *theleis hygiēs genesthai?* we must remember that he means 'Do you (truly) desire to be well?',³⁴ not (simply) 'Do you want to recover?' Jesus made the whole man healthy (Jn. 5:15, 7:23) for the first time. Circumcision, by contrast, had not saved him, or any of the many sufferers at 5:3 from the ailments typical of the state of the Old Israel when Jesus found it at its headquarters. They were found, by so-called experts, wholly born in sin, against which circumcision had effected nothing (so Jesus suggests at Jn. 5:14). Everything then depends on the comparison between circumcision and healing of absolute paralysis. Commentators have experienced problems here, claiming that Jesus' inference is a *minori ad maius* ('from the lesser to the greater').³⁵ One

³³ Nestle (13th edn.) suspected a major point after *touto*, a solution adopted by J.H. Bernard (1928) and many modern translators (Moffatt, RSV, NAB, Cassirer, though the NIV avoids the problem), but textual scholars agree now in placing a full point after *thaumazete*.

³⁴ So the NAB. Benjamin Wilson (1864), Luther, the *Bfblia Sagraada*, and the NWT (1961) prefer the 'become well' formula.

³⁵ R. Bultmann, *Gospel of John* (EV: Oxford, 1971), 247–278 at 276–7. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 79, R.E. Brown, *Gospel according to John (i–xii)* (AB: Garden City, 1966), 313. B. Lindars, *Gospel of John* (NCB: London, 1972), 292. R. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St John ii* (EV: London, 1980), 134. Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (London, 3rd edn., 1862), 324–5 (this edn. contains material from German editions) (EV: Edinburgh, [1858], ii, 339), refused to admit that an inference *a minori* was involved. He was right.

recollects that a 'greater' cannot be inferred (on this model) from a 'lesser' unless both are of the same *genus*, or 'kind'. It is alleged that the western inference 'from the lesser to the greater' has a counterpart in rabbinical canons of interpretation, forgetting that those canons apply only to *texts* which are technically brought, for practical purposes, into confrontation with each other. There is no text about healing paralysis, except as prophetic descriptions of the (future) power of Yahweh. That shows us that we are faced with a different phenomenon. There is only one *text* in our picture.

Scholars have repeated³⁶ the teaching of R. Eliezer and R. Eleazar on the right to attempt to save life on the Sabbath. Since a boy may be circumcised in one of his 248 members on the Sabbath his whole body can be saved ('caused to live') on the day of rest.³⁷ As is recognized, there was no danger to life in our case, so that the alleged parallel collapses. Saving a life from a collapsed building is unlike healing a long-standing paralysis,³⁸ though both are acts of benevolence. Playing with words cannot invent a common factor these do not possess. The synagogue-manager's objection at Lk. 13:14 (cf. Jn. 5:16, 18) remains sound, granted (as Jesus admits) healing is a 'work'. And granted that the Torah reflects the requirements of Yahweh (see Gn. 2:2-3); Ex. 31:16-17), even his word (cf. Jn. 4:34, 5:17, 36, 9:4, 17:4)³⁹ should pause on the Sabbath, and the rabbinical passages cited say nothing to the contrary.⁴⁰ Their comparison of 'one member' to 'whole body' could mislead, since it was Abraham, not his male member, that was circumcised. And permission to save life on the Sabbath derives from elsewhere, the fact that the Sabbath was consigned to man, not man to the Sabbath and that one *lives* by the Law (Lv. 18:5; Rm. 10:5; and other texts to the same effect).

³⁶ The first seems to have been J.J. Wetstenius (Wettstein). J.H. Bernard, *John*, i, 264; Bultmann, *John*, 276-7; Dodd, *Interpretation*, 79; Barrett, *John*, 134. J. Bernard, 'Le guérison de Béthesda. Harmoniques judéo-hellénistiques d'un récit de miracle un jour de sabbat', *Mél. Sci. Rel.* 33 (1976), 3-34 at 31.

³⁷ Tosefta, Šabb. 15:16; Babylonian Talmud, Yom. 85b; Mekilta, Šabb. 1.17-19 (ed., trans. Lauterbach, iii, 198). Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, ii, 488 ad 7:23.

³⁸ E. Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (new English version), ii (Edinburgh, 1979), 473.

³⁹ A. Vanhoye, L'Oeuvre du Christ, don du père (Jn. 5,36 et 17,4)', *RSR* 48 (1960), 377-419. J. Bernard, cited at n.36 above.

⁴⁰ J. Klausner did not understand Mk. 3:4, but his conclusion at *Jesus of Nazareth* (EV: New York, 1959), 278-9 is correct. Schürer, *History*, ii, 474 and esp. n.56.

So the rabbis were in effect harmonizing *texts* to obtain a practical solution to a real problem.

The rabbis actually cite the inference called *qal* (or *qol*) *wāhōmer* ('lighter and heavier'), the first of the exegetical principles (*middôt*) of Hillel or R. Ishmael.⁴¹ 'Lighter' here means, approximately, 'less important', 'less problematical', 'heavier' the reverse. A 'light' commandment would be to scare away a bird; a 'heavy' one would be abstaining from cursing a troublesome parent. The inference is illustrated in the scriptures,⁴² the Mishnah,⁴³ and the New Testament.⁴⁴ It has often been discussed.⁴⁵ It works in both directions. If one wants to show that an act is permitted one can infer this from the fact that a similar one, fraught with heavier *prima facie* objections, has been ruled as permitted. If one wants to show that an act is forbidden one points to an act which is *prima facie* less objectionable but has been forbidden. There again, they must be comparable acts. To illustrate: if one may acquire possession on behalf of a minor (who has no legal capacity) one can surely acquire on behalf of one of full age (who has). To illustrate the opposite: one should not chatter with one's own wife; chattering with one's friends' wives is even less acceptable. This brings us to a significant fact: rules, whether derived from the written or the oral law, can be developed in this way (cf. Bab. Talm., Hul. 24a) to fill a gap in information about rules; and this is acceptable because inference from one situation to another like it is known in daily life. For example Moses is arguing with Yahweh about his prospects: 'If the children of Israel (who might be expected to be sympathetic) have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, who am of uncircumcised lips (an imperfect speaker)?' (Ex. 6:12). In

⁴¹ S. Singer, trans., *Authorised Daily Prayer Book* (London, 5722/1962), 14.

⁴² Gn. 44:8; Ex. 6:12; Nm. 12:14; Dt. 31:27; Pr. 11:31, etc.

⁴³ Mishnah, B.B. 9:7; Sanh. 6:5; 'Ab. 1:5, 6:3; Hul. 12:5.

⁴⁴ Mt. 12:5-6, 11-12; Lk. 13:15-16; Rom. 5:6-11; cf. Mt. 7:9-11. D.R. Schwartz, 'Two Pauline Allusions to the Redemption Mechanism of the Crucifixion', *JBL* 102 (1983), 259-68 at p.266.

⁴⁵ H.L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (EV: New York and Philadelphia, 1959, an updated version of the 5th German edn), 94-95, 285; and, for valuable modern references, H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 7th edn. (Munich, 1982), 26-30 (Hillel), 30-32 (Ishmael). D. Daube, 'Rabbinic methods of interpretation and Hellenistic rhetoric', *HUCA* 22 (1949), 239f.; L. Jacobs, *Studies in Talmudic Logic and Methodology* (London, 1961), 3-8; C.K. Barrett, at *Cambridge History of the Bible I* (ed. P.K. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans) (Cambridge, 1970), 383-4, 392-3; D.J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield, 1983), 27; J. Luzarraga at *Est. Bibl.* 30 (1971), 181-2.

our case circumcision, though it enables a Jew to live by other commandments (Lev. 18:5, etc.), is neither more important than, nor less important than miraculous healing of paralysis, for the two are not comparable—the miraculous healing did not confer inability to sin (and ability to ‘live’), or Jesus’ admonition to the former paralytic would have been otiose, but it was much more propitious than circumcision.

Qal wā-hōmer is inapplicable, either as a technical aid to interpretation of texts, or as a feature of popular reasoning. One observes that according to 7:22–23 one could contrast circumcision as a *means* and miraculous healing (in those circumstances) as, *pro tempore*, the same *end* that circumcision was intended to further. The man was made ‘whole’. That gives us a clue. There is an inference, equally well-known amongst the canons of interpretation⁴⁶ called *p̄rat ū-k̄lāl* (‘particular and general’), and the reverse. If particulars have been singled out (as at Dt. 5:14) one can claim that they indicate a class, each member of which will be subject to the same rule. Thus if a specimen act is allowed, another act of the same class may be allowed. Notionally from Abraham’s time onwards the Sabbath may be broken for circumcision. The class, we understand, *if one can be found*, is ‘perfecting the male’ (see Mk. 5:48, 19:21; Cl. 4:12; Js. 3:2). But we do not have two texts to compare here. There is no text enjoining perfecting a male by ‘work’. So, technically speaking, even this canon is inapplicable. But *by analogy* with the rabbinical exegetical principle, just as a popular equivalent (possibly the ancestor) of *qal wā-hōmer* existed, so a popular equivalent to *p̄rat ū-k̄lāl* will have existed. The class we are to imagine is ‘perfecting the male’: circumcision was supposed to be the *incipient* ‘work’, the miracle was confirmation of it. The highest known member of that class—though it did not confer permanent, irreversible perfection—was the miracle. The absence of a text authenticating, authorising, the miracle was neither here nor there. But who could accept this reasoning? For want of

⁴⁶ See nn. 41, 45 above. Where particulars follow a general statement, the general proposition is limited; but particulars alone can give rise to a generalized proposition (so Dt. 22:6–7). Mt. 9:13, 12:7 (Ho. 6:6); Mt. 5:38 (Ex. 21:24) are of interest. In the first case a prophetic text gives rise to particulars which are hard for us to divine from it; in the second a legal proposition provides the basis for numerous detailed sub-propositions which are equally unexpected. In both cases we have a midrash, the former *haggadic*, the latter *halakhic*. The first relates to individuals’ states of mind, the second to principles of conduct. The reasoning is not characteristically rabbinic.

demonstrable analogies (unlike the synoptic reasonings in similar situations) this assertion hangs in the air until the crucifixion and resurrection, when the Messiah's credentials are verified.

What of those rabbinical passages, about the relevance of which there is some debate? *Qal wā-hômer* is there explicitly called upon.⁴⁷ They boil down to this: we are permitted to save life (Lv. 19:16), but does this set aside the Sabbath-restrictions? We may work to achieve circumcision, working upon one tiny member, and by an inference from the lighter to the heavier we may do the complex work involved in searching for a survivor in those all-too-frequent collapsed dwellings. The two acts are in the same *genus*: mechanical operations. There is no suggestion that the whole man is not affected by his circumcision. The rabbis are not talking about sanctification, but about cutting and digging. As recent scholars surmised, these examples should really be excluded from our discussion.

Jn. 7:23 certainly goes back to an apologist for Christ's behaviour who felt no need to squeeze the feet of Christ into rabbinical shoes. An original argument was called for, for miracles do *not* form any chapter of *halakha*, which is human behaviour subject to juristic theory. Christ's advocate here has at his disposal genuine Jewish biblical learning, and he uses it as originally as such circumstances could suggest. Meanwhile we have further proof of John's use of targums.⁴⁸ The Aramaic *š'êlîm*, as we have seen, grounds a splendid pun⁴⁹ and puts circumcision and the miracle into the same class, the perfecting of man. There is a comparable argument at 3: 14–21, perhaps the high point of his reliance on targumic lore.⁵⁰ And was he concerned with pre-Jewish or non-Jewish superstitions (cf. Jn. 4:22–23)? If so, and if traces of other religions survived around (?) Bethesda,⁵¹ that adds

⁴⁷ N.37 above.

⁴⁸ M.-E. Boismard at RB 66 (1959), 376–8; R. Le Déaut, 'Une aggadāh targumique et les 'murmures' de Jean 6', *Bibl.* 50 (1971), 80–83; G. Reim, 'Targum und Johannesevangelium', *BZ* 27 (1983), 1–13; R. Robert, 'Du suaire de Lazare à celui de Jésus. Jean XI, 44 et XX,7', *Rev. Thom.* 88/3 (1988), 410–420.

⁴⁹ Above, p.217.

⁵⁰ H. Maneschg, *Die Erzählung von der eherner Schlange (Num. 21.4–9) in der Auslegung der frühen jüdischen Literatur* (Europ. Hochschulschriften, ser. 23, vol. 157: Frankfurt and Bern, 1981) (see P. Grelot, RB 89 [1982], 605–7). A study of the Brazen Serpent in John is under preparation.

⁵¹ M. Del Verme, 'La piscina probatica: Gv. 5, 1–9. Un problema di critica testuale e di esegesi di fronte i risultati degli ultimi scavi', *BibOr* 18 (1976), 109–119.

nothing to this piece of apologetic, and nothing to the miracle. The latter has indicated the purpose of Christ's healings, and the demand they made on the 'beneficiaries'.

Conclusion

God urged Abraham to be perfect. Jewish tradition affirms that this implies that circumcision is required to be perfect, and the Targums of Gn. 17:1 tell us that 'perfect' was rendered 'whole'. A helpless baby would be made, by a mechanical process, notionally 'whole', even on a Sabbath. Yet many circumcised Jews were not 'whole' in any perceptible fashion; and one paralytic was as helpless as a baby for as long as the Israelites were wandering in the Wilderness. If Jesus sets him on the road to being really 'whole' he does a great deal more than the imitators of Abraham achieve; but his act has the same goal. In both cases the beneficiaries must watch that they do not sin.

Jesus' argument, against those that complain of his healing on the Sabbath, relied on the allegation that both operations fell into the same class. But it is not immediately evident that they do. John relies on general acceptance of ordinary modes of thinking. It is usually claimed that Jesus utilized a Jewish canon of exegesis of texts, 'inference from the lesser to the greater (or vice versa)'. But here we do not have two texts in the same area: circumcision is one thing, but miraculous healing quite another—and no text prescribes it. A more obviously appropriate canon would be 'from the general to the particular (and vice versa)', for what applies in the case of circumcision could be made to apply to any other questionable activity in the same class. If 'perfecting of males' is the class, these two activities can draw support from each other. But since there is no pair of texts upon which the rabbinical technique can be brought to bear, we must fall back on popular modes of reasoning anterior to the developed rabbinical canons. It has been suspected for some time that such popular modes existed, that Jesus utilized them, and to that extent anticipated rabbinical developments.⁵² More important is the discovery that, in proffering this argument at 7:22-23, John indicates that even circumcision, and even the Sabbath, the two most notable *indicia* of Jewry, obtained a new dimension through

⁵² B.J. Koet, *Five Studies on Interpretation of Scripture in Luke-Acts* (Leuven, 1989), 29-30, 141 n.3, 142 n.4 (referring to R.N. Longenecker, M. Dumais, and B. Gerhardsson).

Jesus' miracles. By accepting his healing one may achieve, even on the Sabbath, perhaps especially on the Sabbath, an opportunity of *wholeness* which no mere ceremony could achieve for one vicariously. It is not simply a question of Jewish institutions' becoming obsolete,⁵³ which in a sense they did for believers. It is a question of *why* they did so. Circumcision notionally commences the perfecting of the supine male; Christ places the willing recipient of his grace on to the road indeed.

⁵³ F. Hahn, 'Der Prozes Jesu nach dem Johannesevangelium' in: *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Vorarbeiten, Heft 2* (Zürich, etc., 1970), 23-96 at pp. 69, 71.