

# **The Controversy on Self-witness according to John 5:31–40; 8:12–20 and Philo, *Legum Allegoria* 3.205–208: Some Observations**

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## **Thesis**

Philo of Alexandria is a representative of Diaspora Judaism and of Judaism as such in the late Second Temple period. His writings have also been used to illuminate the background and the wider context of the New Testament and the Early Church. Thus, e.g., many studies have investigated the way Philonic material might illuminate various aspects of the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> It is the aim of this essay to shed new light on the controversy on self-witness reflected in John 5:31–40 and 8:12–20 against the background of Jewish forensic data to be found in the discourse selected from Philo's treatise *Legum Allegoria*, book 3, §§ 205–208.<sup>2</sup> We shall attempt to argue that Philo of Alexandria provides a Jewish referential background for the controversy on self-witness reflected in Jn 5:31–40 and 8:12–20.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the data in *Leg. All.* 3.205–208, overlooked among the interpreters of John, delivers documentation for the view that the controversy on self-witness in Jn 5:31–40 and 8:12–20 is a specifically 'Christian' version of a discussion which most probably also has existed among Jews in Alexandria. The study will evidence that aspects of the debate reported by John on this forensic topic can be located within a Jewish context exemplified by Philo. Specifically, the view represented by Philo, viz. that only God was capable of giving a self-authenticating testimony, supplies a Jewish context for the point made by the Evangelist that Jesus could testify to himself because of his divine origin. By unfolding and supporting such a hypothesis by means of a comparison of Philo and John we hope to suggest fresh answers to some of the questions raised among scholars concerning the Johannine texts.

The course of this study will be: First, an outline of the relevant texts in Philo and John will be given. Then, the state of research shall be sketched. Finally, by the way of a comparison of Philo and John our hypothesis will be argued. The study will be rounded off by a conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> See P. Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 105, for references.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay the Gospel of John=John. The author may also be referred to as 'the Evangelist'. In references the abbreviation Jn is used. The Biblical texts are quoted according to RSV. The Philonic texts are rendered according to LCL.

<sup>3</sup> By "referential background" we mean the general setup of institutions, conventions, philosophies, ideas, etc., which, without necessarily being explicitly referred to in a text, nonetheless form a background of that to which the text refers, and this in such a way that one should know about this background in order to catch the full implication of the text. We can imagine cases in which such features and implications of a text are fully shared by the author and the reader, in such a way that the sender's and receiver's horizons coincide. Here we will assume the view that a receiver has a correct understanding of a text, when the sender and receiver fully share features of the background to which the message of the text refers. Cf. P. J. Bekken, *The Word is near You: A Study of Deuteronomy 30:12–14 in Paul's Letter to the Romans in a Jewish Context* (BZNTW 144; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming).

## **An outline of *Leg. All.* 3.205–208 within its literary context**

*Leg. All.* 3.205-208 is located within the literary context of one of the two main groups of expository writings in the Philonic corpus, viz. the exegetical commentaries on Genesis.<sup>4</sup> This series covers the main part of Genesis 2-41. In general they have the form of a running verse-by-verse commentary on the biblical texts. In *The Allegorical Laws*, Book 3 (*Legum Allegoriae* 3) Philo comments on Genesis 3:8b-19. He uses the verses from Genesis as headings and starting points for expositions of other parts of the Pentateuch. Thus, the structure of the immediate literary context to *Leg. All.* 3.205-208, viz. *Leg. All.* 3.200-219, can be displayed in the following way:

*Leg. All.* 3.200: Quotation of the main biblical text, Gen 3:16: “And to the woman He said, ‘I will greatly multiply thy sorrows and thy groaning’”  
(Καὶ τῇ γυναικὶ εἶπε Πληθύνων πληθυνῶ τὰς λύπας σου καὶ τὸν στεναγμὸν σου).

*Leg. All.* 3.200-202: Direct paraphrasing exegesis of the word “grief” (λύπη) from Gen 3:16 as the lot of Sense-perception in contrast to gladness, exemplified by the way the slave and the athlete take a beating.

*Leg. All.* 3.203-210: Whereas God has appointed pains on the woman-sense, he has bestowed on the noble soul an abundance of ‘blessings’. This topic is exemplified by a quotation of Gen 22:16 followed by an exegetical paraphrase of the words “By Myself I have sworn” (203-208) and “for whose sake thou has done this thing” (209-210) from the quotation. References to other biblical texts such as Num 12:7 (204) and Deut 6:13 (208) are given.

*Leg. All.* 3.211-219: Philo returns to the main text of Gen 3:16: Direct paraphrasing exegesis of the word “groaning” (στεναγμός). There are references to other biblical texts such as Exod 2:23 (212; 214), Exod 20:24 (215), Gen 17:15f. (217-218), Gen 18:11 (218), and Gen 21:6 (219).

As regards the content of *Leg. All.* 3.205-208 it consists of Philo’s paraphrasing exegesis of the words “By Myself I have sworn” from Gen 22:16. In § 204 Philo refers to some interlocutors who object to the case of an oath taken by God: “Some have said, that it was inappropriate for Him to swear”. Then follows an immediate definition on an oath according to Philo:

For an oath is added to assist faith, and only God and one who is God’s friend is faithful, even as Moses is said to have been found “faithful in all his house” (Num 12:7). Moreover, the very words of God are oaths and laws of God and most sacred ordinances; and a proof of His sure strength is that whatever He saith cometh to pass,

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<sup>4</sup> The exegetical commentaries on Genesis fall into two subordinate series: a) *Questions and Answers on Genesis and on Exodus*. B) *The Allegorical Commentary on Genesis* consists of *Allegorical Laws* 1-3; *On the Cherubim*; *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*; *The Worse Attacks the Better*; *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain*; *On the Giants*; *On the Unchangeableness of God*; *On Husbandry*; *On Noah’s Work as Planter*; *On Drunkenness*; *On Sobriety*; *On the Confusion of Tongues*; *On the Migration of Abraham*; *Who is the Heir of Divine Things?*; *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*; *On Flight and Finding*; *On the Change of Names*; *On God*; *On Dreams*. The other main group of expository writings is *The Exposition of the Laws of Moses*, in which Philo to a great extent paraphrases and expands the biblical texts.

and this is specially characteristic of an oath. It would seem to be a corollary from this that all God's words are oaths receiving confirmation by accomplishment in act.

In §§ 205-208 Philo returns to the objection of the other interpreters and his own subsequent answer. Thus, this text consists of a dialogue, in which the problem raised by the interpreters is solved by Philo in the form of a "questions and answers". The text can be structured and rendered in this way:

**The problem propounded by other interpreters:**

(205) They say indeed that an oath is a calling God to witness to a point which is disputed; so if it is God that swears, He bears witness to Himself, which is absurd, for he that bears the witness must needs be a different person from him on whose behalf it is borne.

**Question:**

What then must we say?

**Answer:**

First that there is nothing amiss in God bearing witness to Himself.

For who else would be capable of bearing witness to Him?

Secondly, He Himself is to Himself all that is most precious, kinsman, intimate, friend, virtue, happiness, blessedness, knowledge, understanding, beginning, end, whole, everything, judge, decision, counsel, law, process, sovereignty.

(206) Besides if we once take "by Myself have I sworn" in the right way, we shall quit this excessive quibbling.

**Philo's final answer to the objection and the solution of the problem:**

Probably then the truth of the matter is something like this. Nothing that can give assurance can give positive assurance touching God, for to none has He shown His nature, but He has rendered it invisible to our whole race. Who can assert of the First cause either that It is without body or that It is a body, that It is of such a kind or that It is of no kind? In a word who can make any positive assertion concerning His essence or quality or state or movement? Nay He alone shall affirm anything regarding Himself since He alone has unerringly exact knowledge of His own nature.

**Conclusion:**

(207) God alone therefore is the strongest security first for Himself, and in the next place for His deeds also, so that He naturally swore by Himself when giving assurance as to Himself, a thing impossible for another than He.

**Consequence:**

It follows that men who say that they swear by God should be considered actually impious; for naturally no one swears by Him, seeing that he is unable to possess knowledge regarding his nature. No, we may be content if we are able to swear by His

name (as we have seen) the interpreting word. For this must be God for us the imperfect folk, but as for the wise and perfect, the primal Being is their God. (208) Moses too, let us observe, filled with wonder at the transcendency of the Uncreate, says, “and thou shalt swear by His name” [Deut. vi. 13], not “by Him,” for it is enough for the created being that he should be accredited and have witness borne to him by the Divine word; but let God be His own most sure guarantee and evidence.

With regard to its content it is clear that Philo here renders a discussion on the rule of self-witness and the problem that arises when it is applied to God. Philo refers to some other interpreters who deny that anyone can give witness in his own case; accordingly, they hold it to be absurd too that God can bear witness to Himself. Philo refutes such an objection by arguing in various ways that it is only God who is capable of giving witness to himself. We will await a further analysis of both the “form” and the content of this Philonic text and its probable setting, until we reach to the point of comparison with the Johannine texts. Next we shall give a brief sketch of these two texts.

## **An outline of Jn 5:31-40 and 8:12-20 within their literary contexts<sup>5</sup>**

### **Jn 5:31-40**

The context of Jn 5:31-40 is as follows: According to Jn 5:1-18 the accusations against Jesus is twofold: 1. He has broken the laws of the Sabbath as it was not lawful to carry a pallet; 2. In his justification of the healing on the Sabbath, Jesus made the claim that he was doing the same works as God the Father. He made himself ‘equal to God’, and the ‘Jews’ sought to kill him (Jn 5:18).

In the following section, Jn 5:19-30, the relationship between the Son and the God, the Father is characterized. A conclusion is reached in v.30: ‘I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.’

Upon what evidence do the claims of Jesus rest? In Jn 5:31-40 the Evangelist delivers the “Legitimation Jesu” in order to explain further the relation between God, the Father and the Son.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the trial scene depicted in the remaining part of Jn 5 is characterized by a forensic debate between Jesus and his Jewish opponents, in which the Baptist, Jesus’ own works, God the sender, and the Scriptures serve as Jesus’ witnesses.<sup>7</sup>

An outline of the text runs:

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate John’s use of oral or written gospel traditions in these texts.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. H. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 319.

<sup>7</sup> For a rhetorical analysis of Jn 5:31-47, see H. Attridge, “Argumentation in John 5,” in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference* (Edited by A. Eriksson, T. H. Olbricht, and W. Überlacker. Emory Studies in Early Christianity, vol. 8; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2002) 188-199, esp. 196-199.

### **The claim of Jesus:**

If I alone bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true; there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true.

### **First testimony:**

You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Not that the testimony which I receive is from man; but I say this that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.

### **Second testimony:**

But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me.

### **Third testimony:**

And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness to me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen; and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent.

### **Fourth testimony:**

You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

## **John 8:12-20**

As regards the location of this text within its literary context, Jn 8 is among most scholars seen as a direct continuation from chapter 7, so that Jn 7:1-8:59 is seen as a unit. Thus, Jn 8:12 is a saying on Jesus as the Light of the world comparable to Jn 7:37. This theme is here used to introduce the theme of testimonies to Jesus (Jn 8:13-20), which seems to be a further development of the discourse in Jn 5:31-40. In Jn 8:21-30 the questions are raised about whence Jesus comes and whither he goes, who is the Father and who is Jesus. The similar theme on his identity and his relation to his Father is further developed in Jn 8:31-59, however, in new terms.

The affirmation that Jesus is the truth made known to men leads to the development of the theme in which Jesus and his adversaries are contrasted. The objections by the critics and Jesus' answer can be listed as follows:

### **The claim of Jesus:**

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

### **The objection of the Pharisees:**

The Pharisees then said to him, “You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true.”

### **The reply of Jesus to the objection by a threefold argument:**

#### **(First argument)**

Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going, but you do not know whence I have come and whither I am going.

#### **(Second argument)**

You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone who judge, but I and he who sent me.

#### **(Third argument)**

In your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true; I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me.”

### **Question:**

They said to him therefore, “Where is your Father?”

### **Answer:**

Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father; If you knew me, you would know my Father also.”

### **Editorial note:**

These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

After having presented briefly the relevant texts, we turn to some of the main questions posed among scholars on the Johannine discourses as a foil for the formulation of the thesis of the study.

## **The state of research**

Are there legal and forensic traditions in the Philonic corpus which may shed light upon the legal features of the passages Jn 5:31-40 and 8:12-20? A survey of the scholarly literature

concludes that the field is open for a study comparing Philo and John on this issue.<sup>8</sup> J. Beutler, when discussing Jn 5:31 and 8:13-14, presents the commonly accepted view that John here reflects a judicial principle attested in Jewish, Greek as well as in Latin sources, viz. that a person cannot serve as his own witness.<sup>9</sup> Although Beutler has discussed the Philonic material on witness, which he characterises as non-forensic, he does not however draw on this data in the course of his analysis of Jn 5:31-37 and 8:12-17.<sup>10</sup> Concerning Jn 8:13-14, Beutler represents a commonly held view among scholars: “Die Ausnahme von der genannten Rechtsregel ist in dem besonderen Fall Jesu begründet”.<sup>11</sup> In a review of Beutler’s book, P. Borgen commented on such a point of view:

Thus, he [sic. Beutler] here overlooks that Philo, (who refers the view of others) in *Leg. All.*, III, 205, states an exception to the rule against self-witness in a way which corresponds to that of John. According to Philo, only God is capable of giving witness to himself. John correspondingly states that Jesus can witness to himself because of His divine origin. Thus, John presupposes Jewish debate on the forensic rule against self-witness and the problem that arises when it is applied to God. The Evangelist did not himself create the exception to the rule when it was applied to Jesus, as Beutler claims.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, Borgen has not followed up this hypothesis in his later studies on John by an extensive analysis of this Philonic text in comparison with the two Johannine texts. Thus, the present study will be an effort to unfold the thesis Borgen hinted at by a detailed comparative analysis of the relevant texts.

If we presuppose that the Philonic data provides a Jewish context for understanding the controversy reflected in Jn 5:31 and 8:13-14, we can ask more specifically: Are there particular aspects of these Johannine texts Philo may illuminate too? As a background for our attempt to answer this question it will be profitable to begin with some of the problems which scholars have discussed regarding the Johannine texts.

**a.** Is there a contradiction between the statements in Jn 5:31 (“If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed true”) and Jn 8:14 (“Jesus answered: ‘Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true ...’”)? According to Jn 5:31–32 Jesus is seen as a human being who is dependent on and in need of his Father’s testimony. On the other hand, in Jn 8:14 Jesus’ own witness is viewed as self-authenticating. C. K. Barrett comments on Jn 5:31:

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<sup>8</sup> Among scholars who have examined the forensic aspect in John, T. Preiss (*Life in Christ*. [StBth 13; London: SCM. Translation of *La Vie en Christ*. Neuchâtel-Paris, 1951]), N. A. Dahl (“The Johannine Church and History,” in *Current issues in New Testament Interpretation: FS O. A. Piper*. [Edited by W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder. New York: Harper, 1962], 124-142), J. Blank (*Krisis: Untersuchungen zur johanneischen Christologie und Eschatologie*. [Freiburg: Lambertus Verlag, 1964]), S. Pancaro (*The Law in the Fourth Gospel*. [NovT Suppl 13; Leiden: Brill, 1975]), J. Beutler (*Martyria: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes*. [Frankfurter Theologische Studien 10; Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1972]), and A. Lincoln (*Truth on trial: The lawsuit motif in John’s Gospel*. [Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000]) have made helpful contributions. However, neither of these scholars have drawn on Philo’s writings to illuminate the judicial connotations of Jn 5:31–40 and 8:12–20.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Beutler, *Martyria*, 256 n. 182, for references.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–148.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 268, for further references to scholars maintaining such a view.

<sup>12</sup> Borgen, “Review of J. Beutler, *Martyria: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Zeugnisthema bei Johannes*. Frankfurter Theologische Studien 10; Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1972,” *Biblica* 55 (1974) 583.

In this verse there is a formal contradiction with 8.14 [...] . In each place the speech is *ad hominem* and the meaning is sufficiently plain; yet it may be questioned whether a writer who had fully revised his work would have left the two statements in their present form.<sup>13</sup>

H. Thyen thinks that the contradiction is “nur scheinbar” and objects to Barrett’s understanding:

Da muss man Johannes nicht der Flüchtigkeit verdächtigen und wie Barrett fragen, „ob ein Schriftsteller, der sein Werk vollständig durchgesehen hat, die zwei Aussagen in ihrer vorliegenden Form hätte stehen lassen“ (Komm. 279). Denn gerade in diesem gewiss nicht zufällig ‚stehen gebliebenen‘, sondern absichtsvoll gesetzten Widerspruch besteht ja das Paradox der Sendung Jesu als des fleischgewordenen Logos.<sup>14</sup>

Darum kann und muss der Sohn dem Satz, dass sein Zeugnis, wenn es denn ein Zeugnis in eigener Sache wäre, unglaubwürdig ist, in 8,14 den anderen Satz hinzufügen, dass aber sein Zeugnis gleichwohl glaubwürdig ist, weil es nämlich gar nicht das Seine ist.<sup>15</sup>

A. Lincoln states his understanding of Jn 5:31 and 8:14 as follows:

On the one hand, in 5:31, 32, Jesus as a human being is totally dependent on his Father and in need of the Father’s validating testimony. On the other hand, here in 8:14, he is so at one with God that his witness is self-authenticating, for by definition God needs no one to validate God’s testimony.<sup>16</sup>

As we shall observe in more detail below, Philo can provide a Jewish context which testifies to Lincoln’s reading of John 8:14 and which might explain Jesus’ exceptional identity of the one who is testifying about himself, viz. only God is capable of giving witness to himself, and therefore his witness is self-authenticating.

**b. J. Blank** has raised another question concerning John 8:14:

Die Begründung ὅτι οἶδα πόθεν ἦλθον καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγω ist freilich merkwürdig genug. Wie kan Jesu Wissen um seinen Ursprung und sein Ziel, also um seinen Weg, Grund sein für die Wahrheit des Selbstzeugnisses?<sup>17</sup>

Blank suggests this answer:

Jesu Wissen um seinen Woher und Wohin bezeichnet sein vollkommenes Um-sich selber-Wissen; Jesus weiss so um sich selbst, dass ihm sein Woher und Wohin bekannt

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<sup>13</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2. ed.; London: SPCK, 1978) 264.

<sup>14</sup> Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 319.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>16</sup> Lincoln, *Truth on trial*, 84-85.

<sup>17</sup> Blank, *Krisis*, 217–218.



ist. [...] Somit ist deutlich: Jesu Wissen um sein Woher und Wohin ist nicht anderes, als das Wissen um seinen Ausgang vom und seine Rückkehr zum Vater; sein Wissen um den Vater überhaupt als Ursprung und Ziel seiner selbst.<sup>18</sup>

As we shall observe, John's way of reasoning about Jesus' self-authenticating witness has an analogy in Philo.

c. How are we to understand the various testimonies of John the Baptist, the Father, the works, and the Scriptures? To what do they refer and do they have the same status as witnesses?

According to Barrett there is a discussion in John on testimonies which are of primarily or secondary authority. Only the witness of God himself is a satisfactory testimony to Jesus. The others—the witness of the Baptist, the witness of the works done by Jesus in the Father's name, and the witness of the Old Testament—these are all derived testimonies, of real but secondary authority.<sup>19</sup>

According to Lincoln the various testimonies which are adduced to provide proof for Jesus 'do not constitute a straightforward list where each is distinct and has the same status as witness, as commentators frequently suggest'.<sup>20</sup> Lincoln holds the view that

Jesus works, which are given him by the Father, and the Scriptures, which are the Father's word, can, then, both be seen as the visible aspects of the Father's testimony. This testimony is contrasted to that of the Baptist.<sup>21</sup>

Thyen, who shares a similar perspective, thinks, however, that John makes some sort of distinction between the witnesses of God to Jesus, viz. the "works" and the "Scriptures", explicitly mentioned in Jn 5:36 and 5:39 and the Father's witness referred to in Jn 5:37a.<sup>22</sup> This point of view, then, raises the question: Does the Evangelist by the reference to the Father's direct witness in Jn 5:37a. think of a particular occasion or a particular kind of witness? Scholars have made several different suggestions. Most scholars take it to refer to the Father's witness through the "works" of Jesus and the "Scriptures".<sup>23</sup> Other interpreters have seen here an allusion to the voice from heaven at the Baptism.<sup>24</sup> Barrett has suggested that it refers to the testimony of God granted to those who first believe in Jesus.<sup>25</sup> R. Schnackenburg has connected the idea about the testimony of the Father in Jn 5:37a. with the verb σφραγίζω in Jn 6:27b., which according to Lidell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon means to "to accredit as an envoy", with an equivalent in the Hebrew and Aramaic word סָהַם, "to seal", which is the technical term for sealing as a witness.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the understanding of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel*, 258.

<sup>20</sup> Lincoln, *Truth on trial*, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 323.

<sup>23</sup> So, e.g., Dahl, "The Johannine Church", 109; Pancaro, *The Law*, 224; Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 323.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example, R. Asting, *Die verkündigung des Wortes im Urchristentum, dargestellt an den Begriffen „Wort gottes“, „Evangelium“ und „Zeugnis“* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1939) 679; J. Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament. Sonderbd.; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976) 133.

<sup>25</sup> Barrett, *The Gospel*, 267.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon: A New Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Reprint, 1958), 1742; M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Reprint Israel, no date) 513-514.

Schnackenburg suggests that the testimony of the Father in Jn 5:37a. points to the way God sealed the Son of Man and bore witness to Him as his envoy.<sup>27</sup>

The questions about the meaning of the various testimonies and in particular the witness of the Father shall be dealt with more fully in the comparison of John and Philo.

**d.** Is Jn 5:37b. to be treated as a parenthesis or is it to be put on the same footing as Jn 5:38a. as a reproach? The opinions of the scholars are divided on this point. If the words of v. 37b. are a parenthesis, they are not meant as a reproach but a statement of a fact and/or a recognized principle. Then the Evangelist rejects the notion that the “Jews” have ever heard the voice of God or seen his form. The principle is that there is no direct access to the Father: God is transcendent, and his form and voice are not immediately accessible and assessable. Fact and principle need not both be affirmed. Scholars such as Dahl, Borgen, and Pancaro hold the view that Jn 5:37b. is to be taken as a reproach and that it alludes to the revelation at Sinai.<sup>28</sup> There the Israelites heard the voice of God, and – in spite of Deuteronomy 4:12 – according to some Jewish texts and traditions they also saw his “form”.<sup>29</sup> Since Jn 6:46 declares that there is no vision of God apart from the Son, then it is probable that God’s “form” appearing at Mount Sinai, is identified with the Son of God. Hence, in John’s interpretation the “Jews”, refusing to believe in Jesus, prove that they did not see God’s “form” and so have no share in the (anticipatory) revelation of the Son given to Israel at Mount Sinai.<sup>30</sup>

In the light of the evidence in Philo we shall suggest a Jewish referential background for the interpretation of Jn 5:37b., which also seems to fit in well with the preceding v. 37a.. We turn to compare the texts of Philo and John with emphasis on some interesting points of similarities.

## **A Jewish Controversy on Self-witness: a Comparison of John and Philo**

As we shall observe there are striking points of similarities between Jn 5:31–39; 8:12–20 and *Leg. All.* 3.205–208.

### **1. Controversy on the issue of self-witness**

Both John and Philo refer to a controversy about the validity on self-witness. In John the controversy takes place between Jesus and his interlocutors represented by the “Jews” (Jn 5:31–40) and the “Pharisees” (Jn 8:12–20). According to *Leg. All.* 3.205 the controversy is between Philo himself and probably some other group of interpreters.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John* (Translated by C. Hastings, F. McDonagh, D. Smith, and R. Foley from the German *Das Johannesevangelium* [vol. 2. HThK; Freiburg: Herder, 1971]; London: Burns & Oates, 1980) 38. Borgen (*Early Christianity*, 210-211) follows Schnackenburg in this interpretation of Jn 5:37 and Jn 6:27b..

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Dahl, “The Johannine Church”, 109; Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (NovT Suppl. 10; Leiden: Brill, 1965. Reprint 1981) 151; Pancaro, *The Law*, 218-226.

<sup>29</sup> Dahl (“The Johannine Church,” 109) refers to *Sir* 17:6 and *Midrash Mekilta on Exod* 19:11.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Borgen, *Philo, John and Paul: New Perspectives on Judaism and Early Christianity* (Brown Judaic Studies 131; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987) 165.

<sup>31</sup> To the issue of various groups of interpreters in Alexandria, cf. , e.g., D. Hay, “Philo’s References to Other Allegorists,” *Studia Philonica* 6 (1979-1980) 41-75; idem, *Both Literal and Allegorical. Studies in Philo of*

## 2. Use of the form of “questions and answers” in the context of learned settings

The Johannine discourses are genetically quite diverse, with parallels to a wide range of literary patterns and generic “forms”.<sup>32</sup> Dialogic discourses, with either friendly or hostile interlocutors, are common in John. According to R. Bauckham, the polemic dialogues and discourses in John, punctuated by questions and objections, are probably historically credible as representations of the way Jesus taught.<sup>33</sup> Observations on Jn 8:12–20 in the light of Philonic evidence may support such a consideration. Thus, we will observe that the discourse of John 8:12–20 meets the historiographical criterion of appropriateness to speaker and situation.

First, the controversy reflected in John (Jn 8:12–20) and Philo (*Leg.All.* 205–208) follows the structure of a dialogue, including the form of “questions and answers”.<sup>34</sup> The dialogue in Jn 8:12–20 is introduced by the pronouncement of Jesus about himself (8:12), followed by the objection of the Pharisees (8:13), which in turn leads to Jesus’ refutation of the objection in the form of a threefold reply (8:14–18). This answer raises another question from the Pharisees followed by Jesus’ final answer.

Philo may use complex forms of dialogues, including the devices of objections and replies. In Philo’s writings such objections are introduced by simple formulas, for example phrases such as “some said” (ἔφασαν δέ τινες) and “they say” (φασί) as to be found in *Leg.All.* 3.204–205. Such phrases are also used when Philo makes explicit that he records the views of others.<sup>35</sup> Philo’s answer to the objection made by the interlocutors is in *Leg.All.* 3.205 introduced as a question: “What then must we say (τί οὖν λεκτέον)?” Likewise, the subsequent answers are quite organized: “First (πρῶτον) that there is nothing amiss in God bearing witness to Himself ... Secondly, (ἔπειτα) He Himself is to Himself all that is most precious ...” Examples of similar forms used in questions and answers are found in *Leg.All.* 1.34–35; 1.60–61; 1.102–103; *Virt.* 171–174.<sup>36</sup>

Second, the passage in Jn 8:12–20 is delimited by an editorial note in v. 20 commenting on the setting of the dialogue: “These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught (διδάσκων) in the temple ...” According to John, Jesus’ public teaching in the form of a dialogue with his interlocutors often took place in the Synagogue or the Temple (cf. 6:59; 7:14,28; 18:20). Philo’s writings in general make evident that John’s use of such a form is appropriate when reporting from a learned setting within Judaism such as the Synagogue or the Temple.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Philo testifies to the use of questions and answers and problem-solving exegesis as part of the teaching activity in the Synagogue, as suggested by his report on the expository activity among the Therapeutae:

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*Alexandria’s Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus* (Brown Judaic Studies 232; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991) 81–97.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., J. Beutler, “Literarische Gattungen im Johannesevangelium: Ein Forschungsbericht 1919–1980,” ANRW 2.25.3 (1985) 2506–2568; H. W. Attridge, “Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 121 (2002) 3–21.

<sup>33</sup> R. Bauckham, “Historiographical Characteristics of the Gospel of John,” *NTS* 53 (2007) 17–36.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria”, in *Light in a Spotless Mirror: Reflections on Wisdom Traditions in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. by J. H. Charlesworth and M. A. Daise; Harrisburg/London/New York: Trinity Press International. A Continuum imprint, 2003) 45–76.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *QG* 1,8; 2,64; 3,13; *Opif.* 77.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (NovT Sup 86; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 129; 131; 135.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Spec.Leg.* 1.214; *Leg. All.* 1.33; 1.48; 1.91; 2.103; *QG* 1.62.

... the President of the company ... discusses (ζητεῖ) some questions arising in the Holy Scriptures or solves (ἐπιλύεται) one that has been propounded by someone else, (*Contempl.* 75).

The verb ζητέω and the composite verb ἐπιζητέω are used also elsewhere in Philo's writings when an exegetical question is raised, and answers and solutions are given.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in *Contempl.* 79 the leader is said to have conversed with (διαλέγομαι ["hold converse with", "discuss"]) his audience, and since questions and answers were part of the discourse, the verb means most probably in this context "discuss".

However, a comparison of John with Philo shows obvious differences as well. Firstly, different from Philo the Johannine text is not part of an exegetical exchange, even when such a setting is apparent in the immediate context of John 5:1-18 and 6:28-59.<sup>39</sup> Secondly, although there is no direct reference to a particular learned setting in *Leg. All.* 3.205-208, which is the case in Jn 8:12-20, there are in general many observations which support the hypothesis that Philo's writings draw on the expository activity in the Synagogues.<sup>40</sup> Here we just want to make the point that, against the background of the teaching activity in learned Jewish settings, learned authors such as e.g. John and Philo, would themselves probably draw on the form of "questions and answers" as a rhetorical or literary device in their discourses.

### 3. The ruling about the need for more than one witness

The forensic debate referred to by both John and Philo regards the validity of self-witness. The Pharisees objects to Jesus' assertion about himself by claiming that it cannot be true, since it is a self-witness and therefore invalid according to the laws of testimony. In Jn 8:17 there is an explicit reference to the Old Testament and halachic ruling about the need for more than one witness, with reference to the laws of testimony such as e.g. Deut 19:15. In a passage of the Mishnah dealing with marriage cases, it is stated: "None may be believed when he testifies of himself", (*Ketuboth* 2:9).<sup>41</sup> In Jn 5:31 we need to presuppose such a forensic referential background regarding the invalidity of a self-witness. Accordingly, in Jn 5:31 Jesus himself conceded to the need of more than one witness to be a valid testimony, and consequently he appealed to the Father's testimony on his behalf as a second witness. Thus, it seems to be in the sense of a valid testimony Jesus' words – "If I witness about myself, my testimony is not valid (ἀληθής= 'valid')" – are to be taken. A similar view is held by Thyen:

Das es in diesem Rechtsstreit nicht um die Rekonstruktion oder ‚Aufdeckung‘ irgendeiner abstrakten ‚Wahrheit‘, sondern ganz konkret um die Glaubwürdigkeit des Zeugen geht, wird man das Predikat der Apodosis οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθής am besten mit „ist nicht glaubwürdig“ wiedergeben.<sup>42</sup>

Also in *Leg. All.* 3.205 the biblical laws of testimony seem to be presupposed by the objection against self-witness by those referred to by Philo: "... so if it is God that swears, He bears witness to Himself, which is absurd, for he that bears the witness must needs be a different

<sup>38</sup> See, Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria*, 100-101.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Idem, *Early Christianity*, 110-113; 211-223.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. V. Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l'Écriture chez Philon de l'Alexandrie: son caractère et sa portée; observations philologiques* (ALGHJ 11; Leiden: Brill, 1977) 179-180.

<sup>41</sup> The reference is taken from *The Mishnah. Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and brief Explanatory Notes* (Translated by H. Danby. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1933) 247.

<sup>42</sup> Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 319.

person from him on whose behalf it is borne.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Philo’s reply to this objection in *Leg. All.* 3.205–208 that God is the only one who can witness in his own case, because God alone is to himself the only valid witness, indicates that, as in John, the issue which is discussed is the ‘Glaubwürdigkeit’ and validity of a witness.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4. The concept of self-witness applied to God.

In both Philo and John the concept of self-witness is applied to God. So, Borgen’s suggestion seems to be to the point when he claims that “John presupposes Jewish debate on the forensic rule against self-witness and the problem that arises when it is applied to God.”<sup>45</sup>

According to *Leg. All.* 3.205 the objection against self-witness, even when applied to God, is stated by Philo’s interlocutors referred to as “they”:

They say indeed that an oath is a calling God to witness to a point which is dispute; so if it is God that swears, He bears witness to Himself, which is absurd, for he that bears the witness must needs be a different person from him on whose behalf it is borne.

Philo’s reply to this objection is that there is an exception to the rule against self-witness, viz. only God is capable of giving witness to himself: “First that there is nothing amiss in God bearing witness to Himself. For who else would be capable of bearing witness to Him?” (*Leg. All.* 3.205). This issue is repeated several times throughout *Leg. All.* 3.206–208:

Nay He *alone* (μόνος) shall affirm anything regarding Himself since He *alone* (μόνος) has unerringly exact knowledge of His own nature (206).

God therefore is the strongest security first for Himself, and in the next place for His deeds also, so that He naturally swore by Himself when giving assurance as to Himself, a thing impossible for another than He (207).

[...] but let God be His own most sure guarantee and evidence (208).

Such statements make the point that God’s witness is self-authenticating, because no one but God alone (μόνος) can be able to testify to God. It is also interesting to note that according to Philo the main reason for this is that God has not revealed his true nature to the human race:

Nothing that can give assurance can give positive assurance touching God, for to none has He shown His nature, but He has rendered it invisible to our whole race. Who can assert of the First cause either that It is without body or that It is a body, that It is of such a kind or that It is of no kind? In a word who can make any positive assertion concerning His essence or quality or state or movement? Nay He alone shall affirm

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<sup>43</sup> Philo deals with the question of testimony in *Spec. Leg.* 4.55-78. In *Spec. Leg.* 4.53-54 he refers to various biblical texts prohibiting the evidence of a single witness such as Num 35:30, Deut 17:6 (on death sentences), and Deut 19:15 (on all offences).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the conclusion reached in *Leg. All.* 3.208: “... but let God be his own evidence (πίστις) and most sure witness (μαρτυρία βεβαισιότητα)” [our translation].

<sup>45</sup> Borgen, “Review”, 9.

anything regarding Himself since He alone has unerringly exact knowledge of His own nature (*Leg. All.* 3.206).

... so that He naturally swore by Himself when giving assurance as to Himself, a thing impossible for another than He. It follows that men who say that they swear by God should be considered actually impious; for naturally no one swears by Him, seeing that he is unable to possess *knowledge* regarding his nature (*Leg. All.* 3.207).

It is our hypothesis that such a kind of self-authentic witness by God and its reasoning documented by Philo provides a referential background for the statement in Jn 5:37–38. According to Jn 5:37a., Jesus said: “And the Father who sent me has himself (ἐκεῖνος) borne witness to me.” As we pointed out above, it is not clear to what the specific witness borne by the Father refers. Together with Thyen, we hold the view that there is a distinction between the other witnesses, viz. the “works” and the “Scriptures”, explicitly mentioned in Jn 5:36 and Jn 5:39 and God’s own witness referred to in Jn 5:37.<sup>46</sup> If the Father’s witness alludes to God’s self-authenticating testimony, corresponding to the kind we found in Philo, an explanation might be given both to the emphasis on the demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος in Jn 5:37a. and to the statement following in Jn 5:37b.–38: God’s voice has not been heard, nor has his form been seen; and they [i.e. the “Jews”] have not his word abiding in you. In our view the words of Jn 5:37b are a statement of a fact and of the recognized principle about God’s transcendence. The fact is the notion that the “Jews” have ever heard the voice of God or seen his form.<sup>47</sup> The principle is that there is no direct access to the Father: God is transcendent, and his form and voice are not immediately accessible and assessable. Thus, the meaning of Jn 5:37–38 can be paraphrased as follows: Jesus said: The most adequate evidence of all is that the Father has himself borne witness to me. This is a self-authenticating testimony, because *only* my Father *himself* can testify to the divine relation between himself and me. If you suggest other ways in which God might have been expected to give witness, this is to be denied. The reason is that there is no direct sight or hearing of God, so you have never heard his voice and never seen his form; and because you refuse to believe in me, this shows that his word could not be abiding in you.<sup>48</sup>

Such an understanding of Jn 5:37–38 is also supported by Jesus’ claim in Jn 5:34 that he does not accept witness from a human being. The meaning of this statement in the context is that a human witness such as the Baptist’s would not have been adequate from Jesus’ point of view. For the matter requiring evidence is the relation of Jesus to the Father, and this cannot rest on human surmise, but only on God. In the last analysis only God can testify to divine relations. Moreover, Jn 8:14 seems to follow the same argumentative pattern as Jn 5:37–38. In Jn 8:14 the validity of the self-authenticating testimony of Jesus in terms of knowing about his divine origin is marked out in contrast to unknowing of the Pharisees: “... but you do not know

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 323. Cf. also R. Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (NovT Sup 118; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 150.

<sup>47</sup> B. Lindars (*The Gospel of John* [London: Oliphants, 1972] 229), commenting on Jn 5,37b., is probably right when he claims that the Jewish rabbis would certainly agree with Jesus about the issue of divine transcendence. The evidence in Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.205–208, substantiates such a point of view.

<sup>48</sup> It is plausible that Jn 5:37–38 implies a polemic directed against Jewish claims to participate in the Sinai theophany as visionaries. Elsewhere in John, we meet the denial that anyone has ever seen God (Jn 1:18; 6:46), which seems to be a polemic against the idea of Moses’ ascent to heaven when he ascended the mountain and against similar claims of, or for, other human beings (Philo, *De Vit. Mos.* 1.158–159; cf. also Josephus, *Ant.* 3.96; *Bib. Ant.* 12.1; 4Q491 (frag. 11) 1:12–19; *Mek. Exod.* 19:20; *Num. Rab.* 12:11; *Midr. Ps.* 24:4 and 106:2).

*whence I come and whither I am going*".<sup>49</sup> Whereas Jn 5:37–38 suggest that the self-authenticating witness of God could not be validated by other means, Jn 8:14 correspondingly points out that Jesus is so one with God that his testimony is self-authenticating. Again, the implicit presupposition in both texts is that God by definition needs no one to validate God's self-testimony. In addition, in Jn 8:18 the line of thought is that Jesus' witness to himself and his Father's testimony amount to the same thing because of the unity between the Son and the Father. So we make the observation that Jesus in speaking of himself uses the expression ἐγὼ εἰμὶ—"I am the one who bears witness about myself"—to stress his identification with the role of God as self-authenticating witness. Thus, the theme of God's self-authenticating witness in John becomes Christological: God testifies to himself in the words and works of Jesus.

## 5. The epistemological argument for Jesus' testimony as self-authenticating

In Jn 8:14 Jesus enters the role of God as an exception from the rule that no one can witness in his own case:

Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I *know whence I come and whither I am going*, but you do not know *whence I come and whither I am going*.

The reason is here stated as an epistemological argument in terms of knowing where he has come from and where he is going. W. Meeks emphasises the issue of Jesus' descent and ascent as the content of his esoteric knowledge and as the key to understanding Jesus' identity throughout John's Gospel:

The pattern in John of descent and ascent becomes the cipher for Jesus' self-knowledge as well as for his foreignness to the men of this world. His testimony is true *because* he alone knows "where I come from and where I am going" (8:14). The evangelist has laid the groundwork for this statement. In 3:8 he introduced the motif, with the statement to Nicodemus that of both the Spirit and of the one born of the spirit (= "from above") "you do not know where he comes from and where he goes." The Jerusalemites at the feast of the Tabernacles think they know where Jesus is from: his Galilean origin precludes his being the Prophet or the Christ (7:37-52). [...] the dialogue itself tells the reader that the Jews do not really know where Jesus is from (7:28-9: he is from God), but in a later dialogue he has them admit that they do not know where he is from (9:29: "We know that God spoke to Moses, but this man—we do not know where he is from"). Pilate also asks Jesus, "Where are you from?" (19:9) and receives no answer. The descent and ascent of the Son of Man thus

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, 424, who reads Jn 8:14 in light of Jn 5:34:

Die ‚Wahrheit‘ auch seines Zeugnisses für sich *selbst* begründet Jesus also mit seinem *Wissen* um sein Woher und sein Wohin. Wie er als der einzige Sohn, „den Gott nicht dazu gesandt hat, dass er die Welt verurteile, sondern dazu, dass die Welt durch ihn gerettet werde“ (3,17), um seinen Auftrag weiss und – wie er 5,34 bereits erklärt hatte – keines Menschen als seines Zeugen bedarf (ἐγὼ δὲ οὐ παρὰ ἀνθρώπου τὴν μαρτυρίαν λαμβάνω), ist es unvermeidlich, dass er für sich selbst zeugen muss.

Unfortunately, Thyen has not applied a similar way of reasoning in his interpretation of Jn 5:37–38 as compared to the way he reads Jn 8:14.

becomes not only the key to his identity and identification, but also the primary content of his esoteric knowledge which *distinguishes* him from men who belong to “this world.”<sup>50</sup>

There is an important parallel to this epistemological argument in Philo. In a corresponding way to Jn 8:14, Philo refers in *Leg. All.* 3.205–206 to the esoteric knowledge of God regarding his essence, quality, state, and movement as reason for the case that God can testify to himself:

Secondly, He Himself is to Himself all that is most precious, kinsman, intimate, friend, virtue, happiness, blessedness, *knowledge, understanding*, beginning, end, whole, everything, judge, decision, counsel, law, process, sovereignty [...] In a word who can make any positive assertion concerning His essence or quality or state or *movement*? [...] (205).

Nay *He alone* shall affirm anything regarding Himself since *He alone* has unerringly exact *knowledge* of His own nature (206).

A presupposition of this way of arguing about God seems to be the wide currency of the principle “like is known by like” (τοις ὁμοίοις τὰ ὅμοια γινώσκεσθαι) in Antiquity.<sup>51</sup> Philo’s emphasis that God’s existence cannot be apprehended by any human co-operation is probably due to this principle of likeness.<sup>52</sup>

## 6. Contrast between the divine and human testimony

There seems to be a contrast between the validity of a divine and human testimony in John. R. Bultmann made this point in his comment on Jn 5:34; Jesus cannot accept the witness of men, as that would mean “that there is a commensurable relationship between human and divine standards ....”<sup>53</sup> In both Jn 5:31 and 8:14 Jesus presupposes that if he as a merely human had witnessed in his own case, his testimony would be invalid. However, because of another divine testimony, and because of his divine union with the Father, Jesus claims that he can witness in his own case (Jn 8:14). This contrast between a human and divine level is also presupposed by John in the following statements on Jesus’ testimony:

Not that the testimony which I receive is from man ..., (Jn 5:34).

But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted me to accomplish ... bear me witness that the Father has sent me, (Jn 5:36).

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<sup>50</sup> W. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72, 60.

<sup>51</sup> The principle is recorded according to the work *Against the Professors* 1.303 by Sextus Empiricus (2.-3. century A.D.).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. K. O. Sandnes, “Whence and Whither: A Narrative Perspective on Birth ἄνωθεν (John 3,3-8),” *Biblica* 86 (2005) 153-173, esp. 158-162, who compares Philo and John on this point.

<sup>53</sup> R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray from German *Das Evangelium des Johannes* [KEK 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941]; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) 264.



The Baptist's witness obviously served a different purpose as compared to the others. It was not evidence in the legal sense which was required, but a pointer on a human level to Jesus as the agent of salvation, so that men might turn to Jesus and be saved (Jn 5:33-36).

It is interesting that Philo provides a parallel to this distinction between a divine and human testimony. In *Leg. All.* 3.208 Philo distinguishes between God as the strongest security for himself and his deeds and the human being who is unable to possess knowledge about God's nature, and thus cannot testify to God. On this basis Philo draws the conclusion:

... for it is enough for the created being that he should be accredited and have witness borne to him by the divine word: but let God be His own most sure evidence and witness, (*Leg. All.* 3.208).

## 7. The “works” as an aspect of God’s testimony

In Jn 5:36 it is said that Jesus’ “works” bear witness to him that “the Father has sent me”. In the Johannine context “signs” such as the healing of the paralytic (Jn 5:1–9) and the feeding of the 5000 (Jn 6:1–21) exemplify the witnessing function of Jesus’ “works”: They prove Jesus’ relation to the Father, because they are done with God’s authority with the aim of fulfilling his redemptive purpose. In John there is an emphasis on Jesus’ functional union with his Father with the purpose of avoiding that Jesus could be accused of ditheism.<sup>54</sup> In Jn 5:36 John solves this problem by emphasizing that Jesus was entirely dependent on God.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it is presupposed that God is actually testifying to himself in the works which Jesus performs.<sup>56</sup>

In *Leg. All.* 3.207 it is correspondingly stated that God’s works are an aspect of the way God gives assurance as to himself: ‘God alone therefore is the strongest security first for Himself, and in the next place for His *deeds* also ...’<sup>57</sup>

## 8. The human being is accredited and has witness borne to him by the interpreting word of God

In Jn 5:39 the witness of the Scriptures is mentioned: “You search the Scriptures (ἐρευνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς), because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me.” In the literary context of Jn, chapters 5–6, Jn 5:39 functions as a hermeneutical principle with a parallel formulated in Jn 5:46: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me.” The phrase ἐρευνᾶτε (τὰς γραφάς) in Jn 5:39 is a Greek equivalent for the technical term for performing midrashic exegesis (שׁוֹרְטֵן). It is

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<sup>54</sup> On the problem of Johannine Christology and monotheism, see, e.g., L. Hartman, “Johannine Jesus-Belief and Monotheism,” in *Aspects on the Johannine Literature: Papers presented at a conference of Scandinavian New Testament exegetes at Uppsala, June 16-19, 1986* (Edited by L. Hartman and B. Olsson. CBNT 18; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987) 85-99.

<sup>55</sup> Correspondingly, when Philo in *Deter.* 160–161 solves the problem of ditheism with regard to Moses, he makes clear that God is himself active, while Moses was passive when he appeared as god. This is seen from Philo’s statement of the biblical expression that God *gave him* as “god to Pharaoh” (Exod 7:1). Cf. Borgen, “The Gospel of John and Philo of Alexandria”, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. also Jn 10:37–38. According to Jn 8:29 Jesus did nothing by himself, but only what he had been taught by his Father. Cf. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel* (vol. 2), 121.

<sup>57</sup> In *Vit. Mos.* 2.263 Philo characterizes the “sign” (σημεῖον) of manna falling from heaven as a testimony (μαρτυρία). Cf. also Josephus, *Ap.* 2.53.

interesting that the Scripture quoted in Jn 6:31 and its midrashic exposition in the subsequent vv. 31–58 can be seen to serve as an illustration of the searching of the Scriptures and their witness to Jesus mentioned in Jn 5:39.<sup>58</sup> Thus, e.g., on the basis of the hermeneutical key formulated in Jn 5:39, the pronouncement in Jn 6:35a., “I am *the bread* of life”, renders the precise meaning of the central term in the Scriptural quotation in 31b. “*bread* from heaven he gave them to eat”. The Old Testament quotation in Jn 31b. and its exposition in Jn 6:35a. bear witness to Jesus.

In light of its immediate context, Jn 5:39 expresses the hope that the “Jews” might be able to have witness borne to them of the life available through Jesus, for they approach the Scriptures through learned exposition in the hope that in them they may have eternal life, and the Scriptures testify to Jesus. According to John, the learned study of the “Jews” and the testimony of the Scriptures seem to be in vain since they refuse to believe in Jesus.

Again, *Leg. All.* 3.208 provides an analogy to the conception of the “Scriptures” accredited humans as witness. Using the exegetical method of confirming one reading of the biblical text against an alternative one<sup>59</sup>, Philo makes a distinction between God’s own testimony and the witness of the divine word, which in the context of *Leg.All.* 3.207 is characterized as “the interpreting word” (τοῦ ἐρμηνέως λόγου), accredited to human beings:

Moses too, let us observe, filled with wonder at the transcendency of the Uncreate, says, “and thou shalt swear by His name” [Deut. vi. 13], not “by Him,” for it is enough for the created being that he should be accredited and have witness borne to him by the Divine word; but let God be His own most sure guarantee and evidence.

Moreover, in *Leg. All.* 3.162 we have a close parallel to Jn 5:39. There we find the transitional formulation with the verb μαρτυρέω as the key word: “That the food of the soul is not earthly but heavenly, we shall find abundant evidence in the Sacred Word

(μαρτυρήσει διὰ πλειόνων ὁ ἱερὸς λόγος).” Thus, we find here a correspondence to the idea in Jn 5:39 that the “Scriptures” bear witness to Jesus, who, according to Jn 6:31–58, is “the bread of life” which came down from heaven.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

The following points can summarize the observations of this study:

1. The parallel material in Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.205-208 provides documentation for the view that the controversy on self-witness reflected in Jn 5:31-40 and 8:12-20 is a specifically ‘Christian’ version of a discussion which most probably also has existed among Jews in Alexandria.
2. The controversy reflected in John (Jn 8:12–20) and Philo (*Leg.All.* 205–208) follows the structure of a dialogue, including the form of “questions and answers”.

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Borgen, *Early Christianity*, 217.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Idem, *Philo of Alexandria*, 155. Philo’s use of this method (cf. e.g., *Migr.*1; 43) has parallels in examples found in rabbinic exegesis such as *Mek. on Exod* 15:11, and also in the New Testament, Gal 3:16.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Idem, “The Scriptures and the Words and Works of Jesus: Glimpses from my Research in the Gospel of John”, forthcoming.

3. In particular the view represented by Philo, viz. that only God was capable of giving a self-authenticating testimony, may illuminate the Jewish background of the point made by the Evangelist that Jesus could testify in his own case because of his divine origin.

4. It is our hypothesis that the kind of a self-authentic witness by God and its reasoning documented by Philo provides a further referential background for the statement in Jn 5:37–38. Thus, the words of Jn 5:37b. state the reason for God’s self-witness by the principle of God’s transcendency, viz. the “form” and voice of God are not immediately accessible. Hence, other ways in which one might have expected God to witness are ruled out.

5. According to Jn 8:14 Jesus enters the role of God as an exception from the rule that no one can witness in his own case. The reason is then stated as an epistemological argument in terms of knowing where Jesus has come from and where he is going. In a corresponding way to Jn 8:14, Philo refers in *Leg. All.* 3.205–206 to the esoteric knowledge of God regarding his essence, quality, state, and movement as the reason for the case that God can testify to himself.

6. In John it is presupposed that God is actually testifying to himself by the “works” which Jesus performs. In Philo, *Leg. All.* 3.207 it is correspondingly stated that God’s “deeds” are an aspect of the way God gives assurance as to himself: “God alone therefore is the strongest security first for Himself, and in the next place for His *deeds* also ....”

7. Likewise, in *Leg. All.* 3.208 the distinction is made between God’s own testimony and the witness of the divine word accredited to human beings. Thus, we find here an analogy to the idea in Jn 5:39 that the “Scriptures” bear witness to the “Jews” about Jesus, who is the source of the life for which the “Jews” are searching. According to John, the learned study of the “Jews” and the testimony of the “Scriptures” seem to be in vain since they refuse to believe in Jesus. Such observations support the conclusion that both Philo and John distinguish between testimonies on the divine level and testimonies accredited on a human level. According to John both levels of testimonies are said to attest to the “identity” of Jesus.

8. In the presentation of seminar group 4 “The Role of Biblical Traditions in Identity Formation”, it is stated that one of the objects is to investigate how certain biblical texts and traditions influence on Christology. Since the “Nordic New Testament Conference 2007” pay special attention to perspectives related to forces forming the identity of early Christians, an aspect of our study has been to focus on how a controversy on the biblical laws of testimony within Early Judaism might have contributed to the formation of a “high Christology” as part of the controversy between Early Judaism and the emerging Christian Community at the end of the first century A.D. Thus, in the form of a dialogue in arguments with other “Jews”, the Johannine controversies clarify the sense in which Jesus was for such a circle of believers “equal to God”.