

## THE BACKGROUND TO JESUS' SABBATH HEALING IN JOHN 5

This brief paper, originally written as an academic exploration of the topic, will examine the primary source background to the intersection of Sabbath observance and healing in an especially significant point of conflict in John's gospel (5:9-18; 7:22-23; 9:14-16; cf. synoptics Mk 2:23-3:6; Lk 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Mt 12:1-14). We will focus on John 5:9-18, which begins with the statement in 5:9b, "Now it was the Sabbath on that day." This is indeed the point of the entire chapter, the controversy regarding Jesus' identity and the conflicting practices of contemporary religious Jewish life.

As a primary window into Jesus' claims in John 5 we will take a much closer look at the Sabbath and healing during the time of Jesus. In so doing, we will explore the source material in three areas: 1) a first-century understanding of the Sabbath, 2) a first-century understanding of what constitutes "labor" and therein violations of the Sabbath, and 3) a contemporary concept of healing. We will briefly survey the primary sources of these respective areas and conclude by making pertinent inferences to John 5.

### **Sabbath**

Of course, the foundation of Sabbath understanding begins in the canonical Old Testament with central passages such as Genesis 2:2-3 and Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex 20)

Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Leviticus 25:8, 26:34, Nehemiah 10:31, 13:16ff, and parallel passages complete the canonical picture.<sup>1</sup> From the time of Moses the faithful needed to know precisely what constituted “labor” or “work” so as to not violate the Sabbath. This was perhaps never more important than during 2nd Temple Judaism when the occupation of Israel brought strict observance of the Law to the fore as a possible means of redemption and escape (cf. Jubilees 1:10). This reverence was heightened to the notion that even angels observed the Sabbath with God. “And he told us – all of the angels of the presence and all of the angels of sanctification, these two great kinds – *that we might keep the sabbath with him in heaven and on earth*” (Jubilees 2:18). Again in Jubilees:

“He created heaven and earth and everything which he created in six days. And the LORD made the seventh day holy for all of his works. Therefore he commanded concerning it, “Let everyone who will do any work therein die. And also whoever defiles it let him surely die.” And you, command the children of Israel, and let them guard this day so that they might sanctify it and not do any work therein, and not defile it because it is more holy than any day. And everyone who pollutes it let him surely die. And anyone who will do any work therein, let him surely die forever so that the children of Israel might guard this day throughout their generations and not be uprooted from the land because it is a holy day and a blessed day. And every man who guards it and keeps therein a sabbath from all his work will be holy and blessed always like us. Make known and recount to the children of Israel the judgment of the day that they should keep the sabbath thereon and not forsake it in the error of their hearts. And (make known) that it is not permitted to do work thereon which is unlawful, (it being) unseemly to do their pleasure thereon. And (make known) that they should not prepare thereon anything which will be eaten or drunk, which they have not prepared for themselves on the sixth day. And (make known that it is not lawful) to draw water or to bring in or to take out any work within their dwellings which is carried in their gates. And they shall not bring in or take out from house to house on that day because it is more holy and it is more blessed than any day of the jubilee of jubilees. On this day we kept the sabbath in heaven before it was made known to any human to keep the sabbath thereon upon the earth.” (Jub 2:25-30)

Some rabbis said that the Sabbath outweighed all other commandments of the Torah, going so far to say that if one violated the Sabbath he was guilty of violating the whole Torah (pertinent Rabbinical writings include: *p. Meg.* 1:6; §2; *p. Ned* 3:9, §3; *Lev. Rab.* 3:1; *Gen. Rab.* 10:9-11:10; *Pesiq. Rab* 23:7-8). Later

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.2 §20-21 contains a very strange entry: “Lysimachus...offers an amazing and persuasive reason for how, he says, the *sabbaton* got its name. When they had travelled for six days, he says, they contracted swellings in the groin and for this reason rested on the seventh day, after arriving safely in the land that is now called Judea; and they called that day *sabbaton*, preserving the Egyptian language, for the Egyptians call the inflammation of the groin *sabbatosis*.”

rabbis detailed a meticulous fence around the Sabbath (*m. Abot* 1:1; *t. Ketub.* 1:1; *b. Sabb.* 12b) which brings us to its prohibitions.

### Sabbath Prohibitions

The extreme detail in which Sabbath violations were delineated is intriguing. Take this reference from the Mishnah for example, “A tailor should not go out carrying his needle near nightfall, lest he forget and cross [a boundary]; nor a scribe his pen” (*m. Shabbat* 1:3). Indeed Rabbi Eliezer considered it a violation to bite one’s fingernails on the Sabbath (*m. Shabbat* 10:6). Besides those relatively few elements laid out in the canonical Old Testament, the most extensive list of prohibitions also comes to us in this Mishnaic tractate on the Sabbath.

“The generative categories of labor [prohibited on the Sabbath] are forty less one<sup>2</sup>: he who sews, ploughs, reaps, binds sheaves, threshes, winnows, selects, grinds, sifts, kneads, bakes; who shears wool, washes it, beats it, dyes it, spins, weaves, makes two loops, weaves two threads, separates two threads; ties, unties, sews two stitches, tears in order to sew two stitches; he who traps a deer, slaughters it, flays it, salts it, curds its hide, scrapes it, and cuts it up; he who writes two letters, erases two letters in order to write two letters; he who builds, tears down; he who puts out a fire, kindles a fire; he who hits with a hammer; he who transports an object from one domain to another – lo, these are the forty generative acts of labor less one.” (*m. Shabbat* 7.2)

The detail and debate concerning such prohibitions is staggering (cf. Jubilees 50:6-9). One gets a sense of both the seriousness with which these scholars regarded God’s Law and the silly lengths to which they expanded it. Here, utensils exempt a violator, but a load bigger than an olive convicts him.

“He who takes out a loaf of bread into the public domain is liable. If two people took it out, they are exempt. If one person could not take it out, but two people took it out, they are liable. And R. Simeon declares [them exempt]. He who takes out food in a volume less than the specified measure in a utensil is exempt even on account of the utensil, for the utensil is secondary to it [the food]. [He who takes out] a living person in a bed is exempt even on account of the bed, for the bed is secondary to him. [If he took out] a corpse in a bed, he is liable. And so [one who takes out] an olive’s bulk of corpse matter and olive’s bulk of carrion and a lentil’s bulk of a dead creeping thing is liable. And R. Simeon declares [him] exempt.” (*m. Shabbat* 10.5)

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dt 25:3; Ex 35:1-4; There have been many different attempts at understanding this number scheme. See Kittel VII, 12 for options. See also *b. Shab.* 49b, 73b, 96b.

Separatist communities, such as Qumran, also held to a strict observance of the Sabbath.

Take, for example, this excerpt from the Cairo Genizah of the Damascus Document:

“No-one should go after an animal to pasture it outside his city, except for a thousand cubits.... He is not to raise his hand to strike with the fist.... If it is stubborn, he should not remove it from his house.... No-one should remove anything from the house to outside or from outside to the house. Even if he is in a hut, he should remove nothing from it or bring anything into it. He is not to open a sealed vessel on the sabbath.... No-one should wear perfumes on the sabbath, to go out or come in.... In his dwelling no-one should lift a stone or dust. The wet-nurse should not lift the baby to go out or come in on the sabbath.... No-one should press his servant or his maidservant or his employee on the sabbath.... No-one should help an animal give birth on the sabbath day...And if he makes it fall into a well or a pit, he should not take it out on the sabbath. No-one should stay in a place close to gentiles on the sabbath.... No-one should profane the sabbath by riches or gain on the sabbath.... And any living man who falls into a place of water or into a place <...>, no-one should take him out with a ladder or a rope or a utensil. No-one should offer anything upon the altar on the sabbath, except the sacrifice of the sabbath, for thus it is written: [Lev 23:38] ‘except your offerings on the sabbath.’” (CD 11.5-18)

Other Qumran documents follow suit. The 4Q265 fragment 7, 1.6-9 closely resembles the Cairo Damascus Document above in its abundant rules. The 4Q251 fragments 1-2 record, “and to draw water from a cistern...the drawing... [No] man shall take anything from his place on the Sabbath, [from outside the house into it] or from the house outsi[de]...for him to interpret and read in the Book on the [Sabba]th...” It is clear that specific understanding of what constituted labor was a central concern.

### Healing

There are relatively few healings recorded in the Old Testament canon. And while miraculous healings are by definition abnormal, the value placed on healing is evident in the literature of the period before Christ’s birth and ministry.<sup>3</sup>

“The LORD bound my hands and feet, however, and thus prevented my hands from performing their deeds, because for seven days my right hand became partly withered. I knew, children, that this had happened to me because of Joseph, so I repented and wept. Then I prayed to the LORD God that my hand might be restored and that I might refrain from every defilement and grudge and from all folly, for I knew that I had contemplated an evil deed in the sight of the Lord and of Jacob, my father, on account of Joseph, my brother, because of my envying him.” (*Testament of Simeon* 2.12-13 emphasis added)

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<sup>3</sup> Like John 5, a ‘healing from a distance’ also occurs in the Talmud (*b. Berakot* 34b) but the emphasis is placed on God’s sovereign will as prayers are offered instead of the healer himself as in Jesus’ miracles.

However highly regarded healing was during this time, its procurement on the Sabbath was another matter altogether. Indeed, during the Sabbath one could not even “straighten [the limb of] a child or set a broken bone” (*m. Shabbat* 22.6). Again, “He who put [something] away for seed, for a sample, or for a remedy and [then] took it out on the Sabbath is liable in any amount whatsoever” (*m. Shabbat* 10:1).

Relieving an abscess was not allowed.

“Three matters did they say about before R. Ishmael, and he did not rule concerning them either to prohibit or to permit, and R. Joshua b. Matya worked them out. He who cuts open an abscess on the Sabbath – if it is to make an opening for it, he is liable. But if it is to draw out the pus from it, he is exempt. And concerning him who traps a snake on the Sabbath – if he got involved with it so that it would not bite him, he is exempt. But if it was for the purposes of healing, he is liable...” (*m. Eduyyot* 2.5)

Remedies involving oils or other elixirs were also not allowed.

“He who is concerned about his teeth may not suck vinegar through them. But he dunks [his bread] in the normal way, and if he is healed, he is healed. He who is concerned about his loins, he may not anoint them with wine or vinegar. But he anoints with oil – not with rose oil. Princes [on the Sabbath], anoint themselves with rose oil on their wounds, since it is their way to do so on ordinary days. H. R. Simeon says, ‘All Israelites are princes.’” (*m. Shabbat* 14.4)

Even Sabbath prayer for the sick was a topic of debate among rabbis.

“And so did Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel say, ‘The House of Shammai say, “They do not distribute charity to the poor on the Sabbath in the house of assembly – even funds to marry an orphan boy and an orphan girl. And they do not make a match between a man and his mate. And they do not pray for a sick person on the Sabbath. And the House of Hillel permit.”’” (*t. Sabbath* 16.22)

There are, however, instances of rabbinical teaching which allow for practices that contain elements of healing.<sup>4</sup> In the *Pesahim* tractate of the Mishnah, the rabbis began a line of reasoning concerning things that override Sabbath violations based on the Passover sacrifice.

“These matters regarding the Passover sacrifice override [the prohibitions of] the Sabbath: slaughtering it, tossing its blood, scraping its entrails, and burning its pieces of fat. ...Said R. Eliezer, “Now is it not logical [that these too should override the prohibitions of the Sabbath]? Now if slaughtering, which is prohibited under the category of labor, overrides the Sabbath, these, which are [prohibited only] by reason of Sabbath rest [relying not upon the Scriptural prohibition of actual labor] – should they not override the Sabbath?” (*m. Pesahim* 6:1-2)

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Mac 2:31-38 records the slaughter of Israelites on the Sabbath and the subsequent change of tactic, allowing personal defense; 2 Mac 6:11 laments a similar burning of Jews in a cave on the Sabbath. Personal protection, when life was in danger, became an acceptable “labor” during this period.

The rabbis continue in dialogue fashion:

“R. Aqiba replied and said, ‘Sprinkling [purification water on an unclean person] will prove the case. For it is an obligatory deed, and it is normally prohibited by reason of Sabbath rest, and it does not override the Sabbath. So you, do not be surprised concerning these matters, for even though they are obligatory deeds, and they are prohibited merely by reason of Sabbath rest, they should not override the Sabbath.’ Said to him R. Eliezer, ‘And upon this very fact I base my reasoning. Now, if slaughtering, which is prohibited by reason of constituting an act of labor, overrides the Sabbath, sprinkling, which is prohibited [merely] by reason of Sabbath rest – is it not logical that it [too] should override the Sabbath?’ Said to him R. Aqiba, ‘Matters are just the opposite. Now if sprinkling [purification water on an unclean person], which is prohibited by reason of Sabbath rest, does not override [prohibitions of the Sabbath], slaughtering, which is prohibited by reason of constituting a prohibited act of labor – is it not logical that it too should *not* override the Sabbath?’” (*m. Pesahim* 6:2)

Other Mishnaic passages directly disallow certain healing practices.

“They do not eat Greek hyssop on the Sabbath, because it is not a food for healthy people. But one eats pennyroyal or drinks knotgrass water. All sorts of foods a person eats [which serve for] healing, and all such drinks he may drink, except for palm-tree water [purgative water] or a cup of root water, because they are [solely] for jaundice. But one may drink palm-tree water [to quench] his thirst. And one anoints with root oil [if it is] not for healing.” (*m. Shabbat* 14:3)

Certain rabbis did allow for practices that preserved life: “Further did R. Mattiah b. Harash say, ‘He who has a pain in his throat – they drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath, because it is a matter of doubt as to danger of life. And any matter of doubt to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath” (*m. Yoma* 8:6). It would seem, therefore, that while many forms of healing and remedies were disallowed on the Sabbath, a foundational provision and logic existed during this time that would allow for Sabbath healings without violation.

Circumcision, although not directly related to healing, was allowed on the Sabbath (cf. *m. Shabbat* 18:3-19:5; “all things required for circumcision do they perform on the Sabbath” 18:3). A potentially late Talmudic text helpfully links healing and circumcision in a caveat for Sabbath prohibitions: “If circumcision, which attaches to one only of the 248 members of the human body, suspends the Sabbath, how much more shall [the saving of] the whole body suspend the Sabbath” (*b. Yoma* 85b). Moreover, “Rabbi Jose says, ‘Great is circumcision since it overrides the stringent sabbath” (*m. Ned.* 3.11). Jesus references this practice (John 7:22-23) as an integral part of the continuation of the logic that directly informs his explanatory comments here in John 5.

### Conclusions in John 5

Again, this passage hinges on the statement in 5:9b “Now it was the Sabbath on that day.” According to Sabbath law in the Old Testament (above texts and Jeremiah 17:21) and in the Mishnah, the lame man would not have been allowed to carry his mat, which itself was considered unclean (*m. Shabbat* 6:8 – “And if [a cripple] has a receptacle for pads, it is susceptible to uncleanness. His kneepads are susceptible to uncleanness imparted by pressure.... His chair and its pads are susceptible to uncleanness imparted by pressure, they do not go out with them on the Sabbath, and they do not go in with them into a courtyard.”). The ensuing conflict revolved around Jesus’ potential violation of the Sabbath. Almost no attention is paid to the healing except in regard to its pertinence in Jesus’ conviction of wrongdoing.

“As most commentators recognize, Jesus then concludes with a *qal vahomer* (light to heavy) argument (7:23). Such arguments are quite prominent throughout Tannaitic discussions like those reported in the *Tosefta*, *Mekilta*, *Sipra Leviticus*, *Sipra on Numbers*, and *Sipra on Deuteronomy* [see Keener, 717 for an extended listing]. Although called ‘Hillelite,’ this interpretive rule had already long been part of ancient Mediterranean reasoning. Jesus’ argument runs like this: if the Sabbath could be superseded for (excising) a single member, how much more for (restoring) the whole person (cf. Mark 3:4)? Exactly this form of reasoning appears in a tradition of sages contemporary with John: if the Sabbath supersedes circumcision, which affects a single member, how much more does one’s life, which affects all one’s members, supersede it?” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 716-17)

Based on the above explored texts and logic stream, this interpretation by Jesus supports rather than undermines Sabbath law.

“The issue here is not only the Sabbath but the law as a whole. Jewish teachers often regarded dismissing one commandment as tantamount to dismissing the whole of the Torah: this principle would have been still more true (*qal vaomer*) for a “heavy” biblical commandment like that of the Sabbath. Thus for Jesus’ opponents in this passage, a violation of the Sabbath can indicate a cavalier attitude toward Torah and Moses in general, whereas Jesus will appeal to Moses and the law in his defense (5:39, 45-47).” (Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 641)

Jesus concludes by relating what is perhaps the most controversial of his statements, “My Father is working (ἐργάζομαι) until now, and I Myself am working (ἐργάζομαι).” This resembles *Exodus Rabbah* 30:9 which claims that God is not required to rest on the Sabbath. Continuing the subject in chapters seven and nine, Jesus’ conclusion is clear. The contemporary understanding of the Sabbath was a gross

misappropriation of emphasis and purpose. His healings served to highlight this misunderstanding and direct attention to the greater issue: Jesus as God incarnate.

This brief study has allowed first hand interaction with the primary sources behind a first-century concept of Sabbath, Sabbath violation and healing. We have utilized these texts as primary windows into a contextual understanding of Jesus' healing of a lame man in John 5.