

John 5:18: Jesus and Sabbath Law A Fresh Look at a Challenging Text

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For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him [Jesus]; *not only was he breaking the Sabbath*, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18 NIV).¹

The text above follows the healing of a paralytic man at Bethesda (John 5:1-15) and a brief exchange between certain Jews and Jesus concerning appropriate Sabbath behavior (5:16-17). It in turn introduces a discourse by Jesus on His person and authority (5:19-47). As it appears in the above translation John 5:18 poses a substantial theological problem because it presents Jesus as a habitual Sabbath-breaker. Some Bible translations try to alleviate the problem by translating the imperfect ἔλυεν with a simple past or a simple past perfect thus removing the notion of ongoing violation.² Such attempts are forced.³

Was Jesus in habitual breach of the Sabbath? Apart from John 5, there are six other Sabbath controversies in the gospels: (1) the incident in the cornfields (Matt 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5); (2) the healing of the

¹ All texts are from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978).

² NKJ, NAB, RSV, “he not only broke the Sabbath”; KJV “he had not only broken the Sabbath”; ASV “he not only brake the Sabbath”; DBY “he had not only violated the Sabbath.”

³ Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1988), 275: “The Jews looked to the habitual attitude, not one isolated act and word.”

man with the withered hand (Matt 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11); (3) the healing of a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17); (4) the healing of a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6); (5) a follow up controversy about the healing of John 5:1-18 (John 7:19-24);⁴ and (6) the healing of a blind man (John 9:1-41).

This article will explore some exegetical issues in John 5:18 in relation to the immediate and broader contexts of Sabbath controversies in the gospels. It will first evaluate two traditional interpretations of this text, namely that (a) Jesus was breaking the Sabbath, or (b) was perceived to be, and argue that both are inadequate. It will then proceed to offer an alternative. The approach is primarily theological. It takes a high view of biblical inspiration assuming the historical reliability of the pericopes in question and an overriding theological unity among the diverse accounts. It will not deal with historical critical questions.

1. Jesus in habitual breach of Sabbath law?

A casual reading of John 5:18 suggests that Jesus habitually broke the Sabbath (the imperfect ἔλυεν denotes continuous action) and is so interpreted by a number of commentators.⁵ However, such an interpretation meets several objections. First, it does not fit the immediate context. In John 5:1-8 Jesus heals a paralytic and then tells him to pick his bed and go home. His “bed” would probably have consisted of a mat or blanket or both, on which to lie down and cover if the weather became chilly.⁶ As far as the healing is concerned, nowhere does Scripture prohibit them on the

⁴ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (Nashville TN: B&H, 1996), 284.

⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1930), 3:83 puts it thus: “He was a common and regular Sabbath-breaker”; Beasley-Murray, *John*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 68: “he not only used to break the Sabbath.” Hermann Strathmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968), 101; Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1980), 269-70; Eduard Lohse, “Σάββατον,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:27; Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: a Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 384; Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 247.

⁶ Morris, 269. The word κράββατόν “denotes a campbed, a pallet.”

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Sabbath.⁷ Jesus may have faced opposition regarding them but even within rabbinic Judaism they were eventually accepted as normative.⁸

What seems to offend the Jews,⁹ at least initially, is that the man is carrying his bed (5:10). Jer 17:21-27 and Neh 13:15-22 contain prohibitions against carrying loads on the Sabbath.¹⁰ However, a closer look at the context of these two OT passages indicates that the issue at hand was transporting goods to buy and sell in the market on the Sabbath. In Jeremiah this is indicated by a number of elements. The first is the noun מַשָּׂנֵה used four times (17:21,22,24,27) and translated “load.” It suggests marketable goods carried by donkeys, mules or camels.¹¹ The second, is the fact that the “work” of carrying is defined by the use of the noun מְלָאכָה that carries the idea of one’s “occupation” or “main business.”¹² Third, the repeated reference to the gates of Jerusalem (17:21,24,27) through which the loads were carried confirms that in view was the transportation goods for the market.¹³

The picture in Neh 13:15-22 is similar. Neh 13:15 reads: “In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all

⁷ Christopher Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM, 1990), 552, insightfully observes: “The Sabbath as the symbol of the refreshment and restoration of life. . . was the proper day for doing them.”

⁸ *t.Sab.* 5.16; *b.Yoma* 85b; *Mek.* 31:13; H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, (München: 1922-61), 2:487; Beasley-Murray, 109-10.

⁹ Robert G. Bratcher, “The Jews in the Gospel of John” *Bible Translator* 26 (Oct 1975), 401-9 suggests four possible uses of the word “Jews” in the gospel of John: (a) the whole nation of Israel; (b) residents of Jerusalem and its environs; (c) people hostile to Jesus; (d) the religious authorities in Jerusalem. In this instance the word probably refers to the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Stephen Kim, “The Christological and Eschatological Significance of Jesus’ Miracle in John 5,” *Biblioteca Sacra* (Oct-Dec 2008), 419, holds that “although no specific law prohibited carrying a mat on the Sabbath the Jews may have had Nehemiah 13:15 and Jeremiah 17:21-27 in mind.” The Jews in question are more likely to have had rabbinic prohibitions in mind, but such prohibitions probably arose from an interpretation of texts such as these.

¹¹ Wilhelm Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford:Clarendon, 1979), 672.

¹² William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 196.

¹³ Gerhard Hasel, “Sabbath,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:852.

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other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day.” The noun מִשָּׂא (13:15), this time augmented by the nouns מִכָּר (13:16) and מִמְכָּר (13:20) which can be translated as “merchandise”¹⁴ and “saleable goods.”¹⁵ The idea that in view was a Sabbath market is verified by the mention of some of the goods in question, wine, grapes, figs, fish;¹⁶ by the reference to merchants (13:20); and by the statement that the purpose of the carrying of loads was to sell them (13:15,16).¹⁷ From a biblical perspective, therefore, there is no close parallel between the activities of the man in John 5:1-18 and the OT prohibitions of Jer 17:21-27 and Neh 13:15-22 and no breach of Sabbath was involved in the man carrying his “bed.”

Indeed, Jesus does not admit culpability for the healing or the carrying of the bed but justifies his behavior on the basis that his actions are modeled on God’s: “My Father is working until now, and I am also working” (John 5:17).¹⁸ The idea here is not, as D. A. Carson suggests, that somehow as one on the level of God, Jesus is exempt from prohibitions applicable to others. Rather, the healing of the sick is redemptive work¹⁹ and as such it can never cease.²⁰ John returns to this theme in 7:19-24 as the accusation

¹⁴ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an appendix containing the biblical Aramaic*, (Peabody MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 569; Holladay, 195, renders it “saleable wares.”

¹⁵ Gesenius, 569; Brown, Driver, Briggs, 569, use “sale, ware”; Holladay, 199, “something saleable”.

¹⁶ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, (Waco TX: 1985), 395, who notes a similar problem in Amos 8:5 where merchants felt the Sabbath interfered with their profit making.

¹⁷ Williamson, 395.

¹⁸ Morris, 274, notes that God’s people should rest on Sabbath but that rest should not take the form of idleness. Rather, the compassion of God must be reflected in compassion to others. A. Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Cambridge: University Press, 1882), long ago put it this way: “to cease to do good is not to keep the Sabbath, but to sin.”

¹⁹ John C. Brunt, *A Day for Healing*, 21-24, pointedly observes that the words σῶζω and ἰαμεῖτον used by evangelists to refer to healing miracles point to their conviction that in these miracles Jesus was not only demonstrating his power to heal but create a close connection between healing and salvation.

²⁰ Carson, 247-8 draws from two sources. First, according to Philo (*Leg. Alleg.* 1:5-6), God never ceased his creative work and therefore is not bound by Sabbath prohibitions applicable to humans. By associating himself with God Jesus places himself above Sabbath law. Second, according to rabbinical thought, God works but is not guilty because (a) the entire universe is his domain and therefore whatever he does is within his ‘home’; and (b) God lifts nothing above his stature and therefore is not in breach of Sabbath law when he works. See also Willy Rordorf, *Sunday, the History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church*, (London: SCM, 1968), 98. The concept of God

for the healing resurfaces (7:21). Jesus replies that according to Mosaic Law a person can be circumcised on the Sabbath (7:22). Circumcision meant entry into a covenant relationship with God and was therefore an act of wholeness.²¹ His act of healing is also an act of salvation, even greater than circumcision (ὅλον ἄνθρωπον ὑγιῆ ἐποίησα),²² and therefore permissible on the Sabbath.²³ Jesus concludes his defense with the statement: “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24).²⁴

According to rabbinic tradition the act of carrying the bed could constitute a Sabbath violation (see discussion below). However, in the gospel traditions Jesus is not morally bound by rabbinic casuistry; if anything his attitude is often antagonistic. Forms of the noun παράδοσις appear eight times in two pericopes in the gospels²⁵ always in a context of conflict where Jesus defends his disciples on breaches of Jewish tradition. Twice the teachings of the scribes are called ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων and are juxtaposed with the law of God.²⁶ Verb and related noun forms of

continuing without ceasing his creative work is incompatible with Johannine theology which declares “through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that was made” (3:3). In this verse the aorist ἐγένετο is used twice and the perfect γέγονεν once and all suggest completed action. Bacchiocchi, 42-43, more correctly notes that in John 5:17 the works of God parallel the works of Jesus who is not involved in creative but redemptive activity. He cites related or parallel sayings in the gospel of John (5:36; 6:29; 9:4; 10:37-8; 14:11; 15:24). That works of salvation are implied is confirmed beyond doubt by the follow up controversy of John 7:19-24 where Jesus compares his Sabbath healing to circumcision, a sign of entry into the covenant of God and clearly, therefore, a mark of salvation. See also Walter Specht, “The Sabbath in the New Testament,” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, Kenneth A. Strand, ed., (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 100-101.

²¹ Specht, 101, points to the saying of rabbi Jose (*m. Ned.* 3.11) that circumcision is of such importance that it can override the Sabbath.

²² Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament vol 4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 234.

²³ Borchert, 285: “in referring to the practise of circumcision here Jesus employed a Jewish casuistic method of argument to prove that he was not actually breaking the law.”

²⁴ Brunt, 46-54, observes that none of the healing miracles involved “acute cases of illness” (emphasis his) and as such would have been an especially strong challenge to Pharisaic norms. The meaning Jesus was trying to give was (a) “not a day for legalistic rules and rituals” (p. 47); and (b) the concepts of Sabbath, healing and salvation are very closely intertwined.

²⁵ Matt 15:2, 3, 6; Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 14.

²⁶ Mark 7:7; 15:9.

ὑποκρίνομαι are used repeatedly always in relation to the expositors of Jewish law²⁷ evidence that their approach was considered problematic. In light of the above, it would be unusual for John to conclude the incident of the healing of the paralytic by stating that Jesus “was breaking the Sabbath” when his viewpoint perceives no such breach.

A second problem with the interpretation of John 5:18 that presents Jesus as a Sabbath breaker is that evidence to that effect is lacking not only from the immediate but also from the broader Sabbath context of the gospels. In each of the Sabbath conflicts recorded by the evangelists an accusation is presented against Jesus and/or the disciples only to be debunked.

When the Pharisees accuse the disciples²⁸ of picking and eating heads of corn on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-2), Jesus does not concede the point. Rather, he justifies the disciples on the basis of OT practice (Matt 12:3-5).²⁹ Indeed, he then proceeds to make a statement on appropriate Sabbath behavior (Matt 12:12), which verifies respect for this biblical institution.³⁰ He concludes by declaring the disciples ἀναίτιους – those who have given no offense.³¹ In Mark 3:1-6³² the Pharisees watch Jesus to see if he will heal a man on the Sabbath. Jesus preempts them by asking whether good works of healing are lawful on the Sabbath, but they remain quiet. Jesus performs

²⁷ Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 7:5; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29; 24:51; Mark 7:6; 12:15; Luke 6:42; 12:1,56; 13:15; 20:20.

²⁸ Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, (Waco Tx: Word, 1993), 328, correctly notes that though Jesus was not directly accused indirectly he was since he bore responsibility for his disciples' conduct.

²⁹ Hagner, 329, hesitantly notes “it is possible to regard their activity as a violation of the Torah commandment itself” and cites Ex. 34:21, 20:10 and Deut. 5:14 all of which prohibit labor (לָבַד). It is hard to see how the casual plucking and eating of corn could fall under these prohibitions, something highlighted by the fact that only “some” of the bystanders take offense (Luke 6:2).

³⁰ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 354: “Matthew contends that Jesus’ ethics reflect a more biblically sensitive approach than those of his opponents.”

³¹ Cf. Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5. Mark does not declare the disciples ἀναίτιους but justifies them nonetheless on the basis of OT precedent and on the basis of the statement that Sabbath law was given for the benefit of man (τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο) and therefore their action is legitimate since the disciples are in need, they are hungry. Luke follows Mark in justifying the disciples on the basis of OT precedent but lacks his reference to the beneficial nature of the created Sabbath and Matthew’s verdict ἀναίτιους.

³² Cf. Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11.

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the healing. He feels “angry” and “deeply distressed”³³ because they have failed to understand the true function of Sabbath law (Mark 2:27). They in turn leave his presence and plot to kill him (Mark 3:6).

In Luke 13:10-17 Jesus is accused of violating the Sabbath for healing a crippled woman. His reply indicates that there is nothing wrong with his activity, but rather with the manner in which his accusers have understood Sabbath law:³⁴ “The Lord answered him, ‘You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?’” (Luke 13:15-16). In Luke 14:1-6 there is similar encounter when Jesus heals a man with dropsy. This incident lacks the drama of Mark 3:1-6 but Jesus justifies his healing on a similar basis, namely that acts of healing are perfectly in harmony with and permissible on the Sabbath.

Finally, John 9:1-41 records the healing of a man blind from birth. This is the last Sabbath controversy in the gospels. The Pharisees accuse Jesus again of breach of the Sabbath but not in his presence. John’s verdict of whether any culpability is in view is given in two statements. First, when the healed man is brought to the Sanhedrin and told that the person who healed him is a sinner, he replies: “We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will” (John 9:31). John thus uses the man’s words to confirm Jesus’ innocence.³⁵ Second, when Jesus later meets the man and reveals himself as the Son of God, he pronounces a verdict on his accusers: “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (John 9:39). Here two kinds of people are contrasted. First, there are those like the blind man whose eyes have been opened both physically through the

³³ Mark 3:5: μετ’ ὀργῆς and συλλυπούμενος respectively. Guelich, 137, renders συλλυπούμενος as ‘deeply grieved.’ Furthermore, he states that Jesus perceives the silence of his opponents as evidence of culpability and that their response is reminiscent of Israel’s response to the messages of the prophets and cites Jer. 3:17; 7:24; 9:13; 11:18; 13:10; 16:12; Ps. 81:13; Deut. 29:18.

³⁴ David L. Tiede, *Luke*, (Minneapolis MN: Zondervan, 1988), 250, correctly points out that Jesus was not predisposed against the synagogue ruler since in 8:41 he responded favorably to another ruler’s request. What calls his sharp rebuke is the synagogue ruler’s Sabbath misconceptions.

³⁵ Borchert, 323, opines that John’s record of the man’s words confirm the testimony “that the healer must be a God-authenticated person.”

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healing, and spiritually as he recognizes and worships Jesus. Then there are his accusers who though their physical eyes are intact, they are spiritually blind as exemplified by their opposition to Jesus and their accusations.³⁶

The broader gospel context therefore depicts Jesus and the disciples as innocent in relation to Sabbath law. In light of this, it would be strange for John to completely reverse this picture and declare Jesus to be a habitual Sabbath breaker in John 5:18. Such an interpretation goes against the grain of all other Sabbath incidents.

A third problem with traditional translations/interpretations of John 5:18 is that they contradict clear gospel statements where Jesus is presented as an upholder of Bible law. Such statements are especially numerous in the Synoptic gospels. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declares: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt 5:17-18).³⁷ The Lukan version is equally emphatic: “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law” (Luke 16:17). In Matthew, whoever breaks a commandment or teaches others to do so, will have no place in the kingdom (Matt 5:18).³⁸ To the rich young ruler Jesus says: “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments” (Matt 19:17),³⁹ while in the Markan (Mark 10:19) and Lukan versions (Luke 18:20) Jesus quotes five of the Ten Commandments. In one instance Jesus juxtaposes the 5th commandment with rabbinic traditions upholding the former and condemning the latter in the strongest possible language (Mark 7:1-12; Matt 15:1-9) and concludes: “Thus you

³⁶ Witherington, 185, goes a step further and declares those whose physical eyes are intact but are spiritually deficient as worse than blind. Their attitude is one of “deliberate spiritual perversity or obtuseness.”

³⁷ Hagner, 106, calls this “a further and more forceful statement that Jesus has not come to destroy the law.” Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, (Atlanta GA: John Know, 1975), 106: “The evangelist. . . emphasizes the permanence of the Law.”

³⁸ Schweizer, 105: “What is meant is. . . in fact exclusion from it.” See also Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 52; Hagner, 109.

³⁹ Schnackenburg, 188, writes: “The perfection. . . demanded of all Christ’s disciples leaves the commandments of the Decalogue intact.”

nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (Mark 7:13).⁴⁰

John is not as forthright in highlighting Jesus’ positive relation to the law, yet the evidence is there. During his last meal with the disciples before the crucifixion, Jesus asserts: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10).⁴¹ And when in John 10:31-42 the Jews take up stones to stone him, Jesus interjects that he has done nothing that could call such a sentence upon him. In light of such strong affirmations of Jesus’ respect for biblical law it would be highly contradictory for John to assert in 5:18 that Jesus habitually broke the Sabbath.

Finally, if the desire of the Jews to kill Jesus stemmed primarily from Jesus’ supposed disregard for the Sabbath, it is surprising that no such accusation was brought against him during His trial. This is the more surprising since his prosecutors were hard pressed to find an excuse to condemn Him (Matt 26:59-60). The fact that no Sabbath violation charges were brought indicates that no such charges could have been substantiated.

2. Jesus in *perceived* habitual breach of Sabbath law?

Given the limitations of the first interpretation, some commentators suggest an alternative understanding of John 5:18; namely that while Jesus respected the biblical Sabbath, he was in breach of halakhic traditions regarding it.⁴² In this way, Jesus is absolved of violating a biblical commandment, or of contradictory teaching and practice, and his defense of his Sabbath actions on the basis of OT injunctions is upheld; yet his perceived violations still explain why the Jews wanted to kill Him.

⁴⁰ Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1-8:36*, (Waco TX: Word Books, 1989), 370: “From ‘neglecting’ (7:8) to ‘nullifying’ (7:9) to ‘annulling’ . . . the charge that ‘tradition,’ ‘your tradition’ . . . contravenes God’s commandment, God’s word. . . is now complete.”

⁴¹ J. H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*, (London: T & T Clark, 1999), 484, notes that “no man could state with such complete assurance” the assertion that Jesus made that he had kept God’s commandments.

⁴² E.g. Wilfred Scott, “Sabbath,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 3:409; *SDA Bible Commentary*, (Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 5:950-1; Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 46.

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The discussion so far highlighted all these points and therefore this interpretation seems to fit the evidence better.⁴³ This notwithstanding, the question that still needs to be asked is: does John 5:18 aim to state that the leaders of Israel wanted to kill Jesus because they perceived he broke the Sabbath? I somehow doubt it. First, John 5:18 does not state that Jesus was “perceived as breaking the Sabbath,” but rather Jesus “was breaking the Sabbath.” To facilitate the interpretation that Jesus was victimized only because of perceived violations would require us to read into John 5:18 something that is not there, at least not in an obvious way.

Second, it is doubtful Jews would want to kill someone for infringing on rabbinic interpretation. The time of Jesus was a fluid period in Judaism and opinions on Sabbath observance and other issues varied. The Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai, the Sadducees, Zealots and Essenes all promoted different views. Hillelite casuistry eventually did become normative but only after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This fluidity is evident in the gospels. In Mark 1:21-26 Jesus sets a man free from demon possession during the Sabbath. Nobody objects to this act; rather the people are “amazed” at His power and spread the news throughout Galilee (Mark 1:27-28).⁴⁴ In Luke 13:10-17 Jesus heals a woman during a synagogue meeting. The synagogue ruler becomes indignant and asks the people to seek healing outside the Sabbath hours (Luke 13:14). Some take his side but the majority are “delighted with all the wonderful things he [Jesus] was doing” (Luke 13:17). In Luke 14:1-6, during a meal with Pharisees, Jesus asks whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (Luke 14:3). The Pharisees want to say “no” (Luke 14:6), but find no way to substantiate an objection and remain quiet while Jesus performs the healing. In Mark 1:32 the crowds hesitate to seek healing on the Sabbath and wait until sunset to bring their sick to Jesus. Obviously, there was no consensus regarding Sabbath healings.

Another example of the fluidity of views on Sabbath observance is Luke 6:1-5 where the disciples pick and eat heads of corn while walking through a field on the Sabbath. A controversy ensues, yet it is often overlooked that only *some* (τινῶν) of the Pharisees accused the disciples of

⁴³ Borchert, 288: “Not only in John but also in the Synoptics is Jesus portrayed as seemingly unconcerned for the rabbinic traditions about the Sabbath.” Morris, 271, adds with regard to John 5:18: “Jesus’ act of compassion had not been inhibited because there were scribal regulations forbidding works of healing on that day.”

⁴⁴ Guelich, 58.

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breaking the Sabbath (Luke 6:2). Clearly, for other Pharisees present and non-Pharisees, the actions of the disciples did not constitute a violation of the Sabbath.

In John a similar fluidity is evident. In John 7:21-24, 40-41, when Jesus justifies a Sabbath healing through parallel to Sabbath circumcision the audience begins to wonder whether he indeed is the Messiah. In John 9 after the healing of the blind man there is discussion among the Pharisees. Some disregard the healing on the basis that Jesus has violated the Sabbath; but others do not see any infringement and justify Jesus on the basis that if he had sinned God would not have performed the miracle. John's conclusion fits the overall picture: "so they were divided" (9:16).⁴⁵

This fluidity is also obvious in the Mishnah and, more so, the Babylonian Talmud which record long discussions on proper Sabbath behavior, including the carrying of objects. The Mishnah (*m.Shab* 7.2) considers the transferring of an object from one premise to another as one of the 39 main classes of work (*avot*) prohibited on the Sabbath.⁴⁶ The exact definition of what was allowed to be carried varied. Animal fodder (*m.Shab* 7.4), food for humans (*m.Shab* 7.5; 8.1; 10.4) and articles that might be related to professional work (*m.Shab* 8.2-5) where hotly debated issues and strict principles applied. With regards to the carrying of other objects the Mishnah states: "If one carries out [an article], whether with his right or with his left [hand], in his lap or on his shoulder, he is culpable" on the basis that the sons of Kehath carried their burdens in such manner (*m.Shab* 10.3). Other forms of carrying were allowed. Rabbi Eleazar (2nd century AD) limited culpability to items carried at ten hand breaths height or above the head (*b.Shab* 92a), while there was debate about items carried on the head (*b.Shab* 92a; 92b). Punishment for such Sabbath offenses was a sin offering, not a death penalty.

In light of the above, the man carrying his bed could be considered innocent with regards to biblical law and certain strands of halakhic tradition, but guilty according to others. It is evident therefore that within Judaism different approaches existed regarding Sabbath observance. This

⁴⁵ Cf. Bernard, 332 who also points to 6:52; 7:12, 43; 10:19 for similar examples of division.

⁴⁶ For an insight into rabbinic Sabbath traditions see the tractate "Sabbath" in the *Mishnah* and *Babylonian Talmud* which list 39 main prohibitions including carrying loads on Sabbath, but which, albeit, ante-dates the gospels substantially; also Strack-Billerbeck's lengthy discussion in, 2:454-61.

explains why no legal charges on Sabbath observance were brought against Jesus or the people around him—there was no consistent standard.⁴⁷ The suggestion therefore that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because of breaches of Sabbath tradition looks doubtful.

To summarize the discussion so far, a casual reading of John 5:18 may suggest that Jesus habitually broke the Sabbath prompting the Jews to want to kill him. We saw, however, that such an interpretation cannot stand because: (a) it does not fit the immediate context of John 5 where there is no evidence of Sabbath violation; (b) it does not fit the broader context where in all Sabbath controversies all evangelists uphold the innocence of Jesus and the disciples; (c) it would imply a contradiction between Jesus' calls to obedience to the Torah and his own disobedience; (d) it begs the question, why didn't the Jews use his supposed Sabbath breaking as evidence against him in his trial. An alternative interpretation is to suggest that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because of *perceived* Sabbath violations. This approach, while in harmony to gospel evidence does not seem to bring out the full weight of John 5:18 because: (a) it requires that we read into the text something that is not there; (b) it is unlikely that a breach of Sabbath tradition would prompt such a response because there was no consensus as to what constituted proper Sabbath observance. The two traditional interpretations of John 5:18 are inadequate. Is there a viable alternative?

3. An Alternative Interpretation

The verb “breaking” in John 5:18 translates the Greek ἔλυεν from the root λύω. It can have a variety of shades of meaning but a primary one is to “untie, release, set free.”⁴⁸ If such a shade is preferred the text could be translated as follows:

For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him [Jesus]; *not only was he setting the Sabbath free* [from human casuistry], but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

Is this a viable translation? To test it we will apply three tests: lexical definition, context and insights into the motives of Jesus' opponents.

⁴⁷ The young man in John 9 who was cast out of the synagogue was not punished for washing on the Sabbath but for defending Jesus before the leaders of Israel.

⁴⁸ Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889), 481-2.

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Lexically, the suggested translation seems not only viable but preferable. Liddell and Scott, apart from “untie, release, set free” also use “loosen,” “redeem.”⁴⁹ BDAG defines it as follows: “to undo something that is used to tie up or constrain something,” to “loose, untie”; “to set free something tied or similarly constrained.”⁵⁰ Vine, in his theological dictionary gives the following primary definition: “to loosen, especially by way of deliverance.”⁵¹ Thayer: “to loose any person (or thing) tied or fastened.”⁵² For the Septuagint use of the verb *Lust*, Eynikel and Hauspie define it as, “to loose, untie, unbind, unfasten, open.”⁵³ For early patristic use Lampe opts for the verbs “loose, release.”⁵⁴ The primary nuance, as defined by all respectable lexicons, would be in harmony with my suggested translation.⁵⁵

As secondary nuances *λύω* can mean to dissolve,⁵⁶ “resolve a whole into its parts, dissolve, breakup,”⁵⁷ “break down, destroy, bring to an end,”⁵⁸ “resolve a whole into its parts: loosen, dissolve, break up, destroy.”⁵⁹ BDAG opts for “abolish” in John 5:18.⁶⁰ Thomas Green renders *λύω* in John 5:18 as “infringe.” Moulton translates *ἔλυεν τὸ σάββατον* as “breaking the Sabbath” and parallels it with *λύειν τὰ πένθη*, “to go out of mourning.”⁶¹ All other considerations being equal the exegete/translator should opt for a primary nuance of any given word. As such, on lexical evidence alone, the translation suggested here is a preferable option.

⁴⁹ Liddell and Scott, 481-2.

⁵⁰ Walter Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, (BDAG), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 606.

⁵¹ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words With Their Precise Meaning for English Readers*, (Westwood NJ: Revell, 1962), 194.

⁵² Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1977), 384.

⁵³ J. Lust, E. Eynikel, K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint*, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992),

⁵⁴ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 817.

⁵⁵ Kim, 417: “Through the excessive and restrictive legislation of the rabbis on how to observe this holy day, the Sabbath became a burden.”

⁵⁶ Thayer, 384, Lampe 817.

⁵⁷ Danker, 606.

⁵⁸ Lust, 286.

⁵⁹ G. Abbot-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, (Edinburgh: 1981), 274.

⁶⁰ BDAG, 607.

⁶¹ J. H. Moulton, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, (Grand Rapids MI: 1976), 384.

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Confirming the choice of a positive nuance is the common use of λύω as a technical term. Büchsel notes that the terms δέω και λύω were rabbinic expressions meaning to declare things forbidden or permitted.⁶² A. T. Robertson adds: “To ‘bind’ in rabbinical language is to forbid, to ‘loose’ is to permit. . . Rabbis of the school of Hillel ‘loosed’ many things that the school of Schammai ‘bound’.”⁶³ If we apply such a use to John 5:18 the resultant implication is that Jesus was setting the Sabbath free from rabbinic casuistry, “unbinding” tedious human prohibitions, and that in doing so he was moving within the sphere of his rights as a teacher of the law. Is there evidence that in his Sabbath activities Jesus was liberating the Sabbath from rabbinic casuistry and at the same time making pronouncements on proper Sabbath behavior?

The evidence from the broader context of the seven Sabbath controversies answers the question in the affirmative. In the incident in the field of corn Jesus first defends his disciples and then pronounces a defining principle on Sabbath observance: “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).⁶⁴ The idea here is that the purpose of the Sabbath is to safeguard human wellbeing. Activities in harmony with this principle are valid.⁶⁵ He then declares the authority on which his pronouncement and actions stand: “So the Son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). Matthew drops Mark’s first statement but in its place adds the phrase: “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (Matt 12:7).⁶⁶ The implication is that the accusers have failed to show mercy to the hungry disciples and therefore stand themselves accused. Luke retains only the statement about the Son of Man’s lordship over the Sabbath. Clearly, in all three accounts the evangelists depict Jesus as a person with

⁶² Friedrich Büchsel, δέω (λύω) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:60. He also notes that the words were used in the context of magic in the sense of binding and loose spells but clearly the gospel usages do not fall under this category.

⁶³ Robertson, 1:134.

⁶⁴ Guelich, 124: “The Sabbath as a part of creation must be taken seriously and not lightly dismissed.”

⁶⁵ Guelich, 125, notes that the notion that the Sabbath was given for the benefit of humanity was in harmony with rabbinic interpretation and cites Jub. 2.

⁶⁶ Hagner, 327, pronounces Jesus “the true interpreter of the Sabbath commandment.”

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spiritual authority who rejects traditional interpretation and defines himself appropriate Sabbath behavior.⁶⁷

In the Sabbath controversy of the healing of the man with the withered hand Mark and Luke record that before Jesus heals him he asks him to “stand in front of everyone” (Mark 3:3; Luke 6:8). Jesus does so only after he has perceived that certain men are questioning the legality of Sabbath healings. By asking the sick man to stand Jesus is not only interested in healing the man, but more importantly in demonstrating that to do so is fully within the spirit of the Sabbath. Keener correctly points that here Jesus “reasons from the law itself.”⁶⁸ As such, even as the man stands Jesus asks a rhetorical question concerning what is lawful on the Sabbath.⁶⁹ In Matthew’s account Jesus answers his own question by stating “therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”⁷⁰

In the incident of the healing of the crippled woman Jesus calls those who object to Sabbath healings “hypocrites” (Luke 13:15) because they seem to have greater concern for thirsty cattle than for suffering people.⁷¹ Jesus performs the healing and in this way demonstrates that such inhibitions on Sabbath healings are not only unjustified but the result of corrupt thinking. In the incident of the healing of the man with dropsy Jesus asks Pharisees whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (Luke 14:3). Tiede observes that we know next to nothing about the man and the severity of his condition, or indeed how he responded at the end of the episode.⁷² It seems that Luke's main concern is not the healing itself but the Sabbath context and the legality of the act. To Jesus’ question the Pharisees choose not to respond because. As Pate puts it, they are silenced.⁷³ Jesus proceeds

⁶⁷ Schnackenburg, 112, maintains that the evangelist is here “profiling Jesus as the perfect observer of the will of God in the Old Testament.”

⁶⁸ Keener, 358. He further notes that in contrast to Essenes, Pharisees and most Jews would rescue animals on the Sabbath and cites *b. Shab.* 128b.

⁶⁹ *m. Shab.* 5.1-4; 7.2; 15.1-2; *m. Erub.* 2.1-4 allow untying an ox or ass from the trough to lead the animal to drink water.

⁷⁰ Hagner, 334: “Again Jesus challenges not the Sabbath law itself but the interpretation of the law.”

⁷¹ Tiede, 250-1, points out that the discussion follows rabbinic and Qumran discussions about how strictly Sabbath law was to be observed in the case of domestic animals. Only the most rigid would object to the untying of an animal on Sabbath. Jesus therefore justifies his actions on the basis of rabbinic precedent arguing from the lesser to the greater.

⁷² Tiede 262.

⁷³ Marvin C. Pate, *Luke*, (Chicago IL: Moody, 1995), 294.

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to heal the man indicating that, according to him, it is perfectly lawful to heal on the Sabbath. His interest is to demonstrate what is legal.

In John 7:23 when accused of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus compares the healing to circumcision and declares that those who oppose him look at appearances but fail to see the essence. The implication is, of course, that in essence a healing on the Sabbath is fully in harmony with Sabbath law. In John 9:41, after another Sabbath healing and ensuing controversy, Jesus goes so far as to suggest that opposition to acts of kindness on the Sabbath is tantamount to sin! The very regulations that rabbis have applied to protect the Sabbath are leading to spiritual darkness and therefore breach the Sabbath!

Jesus authority to bind and loose in a legal context is also easily demonstrated by other gospel references. A clear example is the use of the form ἔξεστιν from the root ἔξειμι literally ‘to go out’ but in the form ἔξεστιν denoting what is and is not permissible.⁷⁴ The form appears 28 times in the NT of which 21 are in the gospels.⁷⁵ Of the gospel occurrences 11 times the word is used in the context of the Sabbath, four times by accusers and seven times by Jesus himself. Another ten times the word is used in relation to other legal matters, five of which by Jesus. Beyond the use of ἔξεστιν a significant portion of the Sermon on the Mount concerns legal pronouncements by Jesus juxtaposed with rabbinic tradition (Matt 5:21-28). And to cap it all, Jesus gave the disciples authority to bind and loose (Matt 16:19; 18:18). He could hardly pass on such authority if he did not presume to possess it himself. It is clear therefore that the gospels depict Jesus as a person who has the authority to make legal pronouncements on questions of religious practice.

Summing up the evidence in all Sabbath controversies recorded in the gospels Jesus brushes aside rabbinic inhibitions and takes the prerogative to define what is and is not appropriate Sabbath behavior. To use the rabbinic technical terms, he is both binding and loosing, but primarily loosing.

Finally, translating λύω in its primary sense “set free” in John 5:18 brings to light the true motives of those who wanted to kill Jesus. According to the gospel accounts the opponents of Jesus wanted to kill him

⁷⁴ Liddell and Scott, 589, 592.

⁷⁵ Matt 12:2, 10, 12; 14:4; 19:3; 20:15; 22:17; 27:6; Mark 2:24, 26; 3:4; 6:18; 10:2; 12:14; Luke 6:2, 4, 9; 14:3; 20:22; John 5:10; 18:31 are the gospel references and Acts 16:21; 21:37; 22:25; 1 Cor 6:12 (twice); 10:23 (twice) are the other NT references.

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on a number of occasions. In John 11:51 the chief priests want to kill him because the miracles he performs and his teaching lead people to follow him, something that was perceived as a danger to the nation (11:48). John sees in the statement an unintentional prophecy about the death of the innocent person on behalf of the whole nation. In John 8:37 and 40 Jews, probably Pharisees, and scribes (8:3), want to kill him after a theological confrontation. The text suggests that the real reason is not the theological disagreement as such, but because they follow in the footsteps of the arch murderer, the devil (8:44). In Mark 11:18 (cf. Luke 19:47) the chief priests and teachers of the law unite in their desire to kill Jesus because “they feared him” and his influence over the people.

In Mark 3:6 (cf. Matt 12:14) after the incident of the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, the Pharisees want to kill him. The real reason is not any disagreement over the Sabbath. This is evident by the fact that the Pharisees are joined in their plotting by the Herodians who would not have been as scrupulous in their Sabbath keeping,⁷⁶ or necessarily in theological agreement with the Pharisees.⁷⁷ Finally, in John 7:1-25 the desire to kill Jesus does not stem from one incident but seems a comprehensive response to his ministry. The common thread that runs throughout these pericopes is fear. Jesus is perceived as a challenge and a threat to the established order and therefore his opponents want him removed. So much so, that when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, they desire to kill him too (John 12:10).

Summing the evidence and the argument on the motives of those who wanted to kill Jesus we can say the following with regards to John 5:18. If his opponents wanted to kill Jesus because he was breaking the Sabbath (first interpretation), then these leaders become the defendants of the biblical Sabbath; if they wanted to kill Jesus because of *perceived* Sabbath violations, then they are still justified because though misguided, their motives to defend the faith as they perceive it are still pure. However, if we understand that the opponents wanted to kill Jesus because his binding and

⁷⁶ Defining the identity of the Herodians has been problematic. H. H. Rowley, “The Herodians in the Gospels,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1940), 14-27, offered eleven different possibilities. C. Daniel, ‘Nouveaux arguments en faveur de l’identification des Hérodians et des Esséniens,’ *RevQ* 27 (1970), 397-402 associates the Herodians with the Essenes. More recent scholarship tends to see them as a politically influential aristocracy under the rule of Herod Antipas, the political powers of Galilee. So Rudolf Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), 225; Guelich, 138-9.

⁷⁷ Guelich, 139 calls the common plot of the two groups, a “strange cooperation.”

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loosing on religious questions including the Sabbath (our alternative interpretation), and his influence over the people was perceived as a threat, then the picture becomes clearer. His enemies were not concerned with minute interpretation of Sabbath law, on themselves were not in agreement, but with the fact that this person was undermining the established religious order.

Synopsis

Having discarded the two traditional interpretations on John 5:18 as inadequate, I have suggested that this text should be translated according to the primary meaning of the verb λύω to read that Jesus was setting the Sabbath free. This rendering is linguistically and contextually preferable given the primary nuance of λύω, and its use as a technical rabbinic term for making religious legal pronouncements; and given the agreement of the Synoptics and John that in the Sabbath controversies Jesus assumes the authority to bind and, more importantly, loose. It also brings into right focus the selfish motives of his enemies who wanted to kill him.

I believe that thus properly translated and understood John 5:18 encapsulates the essence of Jesus' relation to the Sabbath. He did not work to destroy it—how could he when He declared that until heaven and earth pass away, the law will still stand. He did not go around disregarding it—how could he when he elsewhere upheld the Ten Commandments. But he set out to set it free from misplaced casuistry and place it in a more positive perspective so that it could indeed be a delight as biblically intended (Isaiah 58:13).

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