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Jesus & the Sabbath

Luke 6:1-5 – Is Jesus Lord or Lawbreaker?

Translation

Luke 6:1-5 – ¹Now it happened on a Sabbath, Jesus was passing through grain fields, and his disciples were plucking and eating heads of grain by rubbing them in their hands. ²Then some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is illegal for Sabbath?” ³Answering them, Jesus said, “Have none of you read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him?” ⁴How he entered the house of God, and taking the bread of offering, he ate and he gave to those with him, that which was illegal to eat except for the priests alone?” ⁵Then he said to them, “The son of man is lord of the Sabbath.”

Introduction

In this passage, Jesus places the matter of Sabbath observance front and center by allowing his disciples to engage in risqué cultural behavior and then contending with the Pharisees over its legality. Jesus himself tells us, “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” (Mt 5:17). Many, however, would have seen his actions in precisely this light: lawbreaking. Joel Green suggests that since the Pharisees “do not invite a discussion about the legitimacy of their interpretation, one may assume that they based their question on widely accepted norms.”¹ Jesus clearly recognized the religious significance of such Sabbath activities; what does Luke reveal of his intentions? Is Jesus guilty of breaking the Sabbath? How should our answer affect our understanding of this passage?

Textual Issues

Before we consider the meaning of the passage, we first need to address several variants within the text which might impact our reading. In verse 1 we face a choice between *ἐν σαββάτῳ* (*p*⁴, *ⲛ*, *B*, *L*, *W*, *f*³, 33, 157, 205, 579, 1241, etc.)² and *ἐν σαββάτῳ δευτεροπρώτῳ* (*A*, *C*, *D*, *Δ*, *Θ*, *Ψ*, 0233, 180, 565, 597, 700, 892, 1009, 1010, 1292, 1342, 1424, 1505, *Byz*, etc.)³ Read literally as “second-first,” Darrell Bock calls this variant “one of the most discussed textual problems in the Gospel.”⁴ The reason is simple: the evidence is inconclusive; there is strong (early) support for both readings. The USB prefers the first option, but only ranks their choice a C, indicating the editors found it difficult to choose between the two. BADG suggests that even ancient interpreters had difficulty making sense of the word.⁵ Heinrich Meyer catalogs a number of historical viewpoints,⁶ ultimately concluding that “all explanations are destitute of proof, because *δευτεροπρώτος* never occurs elsewhere.”⁷ In sum, most scholars seem to share a vague consensus that *if* the term is

¹ Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT), The Gospel of Luke*. 253.

² While *Lect* and *cop*^{bo} appear to have been amended to match Matthew and Mark’s *τοῖς σάββασι*, they are still in basic harmony with this first option.

³ *f*³, 28, 1071, and 1243 read *δευτέρῳ πρώτῳ*, (lit. ‘second, first’) which I am taking as substantively the same.

⁴ Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT), Luke*. 522.

⁵ Bauer, Arndt, Danker, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (BADG)*. 177.

⁶ Meyer, *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament, Gospels of St. Mark and St. Luke (MCNT)*. 329-330. Major options include: 1) a feast-day immediately following the Sabbath (Chrysostom); 2) a Sabbath immediately following a feast-day (Theophylact); 3) the second day of the first feast (Passover) (Isidore of Pelusium); 4) the first feast after the second day of the Passover (Scaliger); 5) the second of the first two Sabbaths of Passover month; 6) the first Sabbath of the second month; 7) a Sabbath at the new moon; 8) the fifteenth of Nisan; 9) the first Sabbath of the second year in a week of years; etc. Meyer is not at all certain the phrase is original – if Luke did pen these words, his lack of explanation suggests his audience would have already been familiar with the phrase; however, the word occurs nowhere else in Greek literature. Meyer takes this as evidence of its inauthenticity.

⁷*Ibid.*, 328.

original, Luke is using it as a technical clarification, either to distinguish this Sabbath from the one that follows (6:6), or to place it within the context of the Jewish religious calendar.⁸

Ultimately, the presence or absence of this word seems to exert little influence on the broader meaning of the passage. A. Leaney observes that if the term denotes a Sabbath between the Passover and the Feast of Firstfruits, then the disciples' actions would have been forbidden on the basis of Lev 23:15.⁹ This line of interpretation is intriguing (especially in light of what I will argue later) – perhaps Luke intends to juxtapose the disciples' conduct with the clear requirements of the Law: Torah keeping Israelites are not supposed to eat *any* grain until the firstfruits have first been offered to YHWH.¹⁰ Unfortunately, such an understanding fails to explain the Pharisees' response; as Nolland states, “[Luke] makes it clear that the problem is not with the action itself but with the fact that the action is performed *on the Sabbath*.”¹¹ Consequently, it seems safe to set this variant aside and adopt the standard USB reading here.

There are several additional variants. Verse 3 concludes with a bracketed [ἄντες] (“those *who were* with him”); verse 4 begins with a bracketed [ὡς] (“*how*”) – but neither seems to significantly impact the meaning of the text. Similarly, we find some support for an extra *καὶ* inserted in the phrase *καὶ ἔδωκεν καὶ τοῖς μετ’ αὐτοῦ* (“and he gave *also* to those with him.” See $\aleph, A, D, \Delta, \Theta, 0233, f^3, 28, 33, 157, 180, 565, 579, 597, 892, 1010, 1071, 1243, 1292, 1505, \text{Byz.}, \text{etc.}$). This probably reflects scribal emendation to conform with the parallel in Mark 2:26; it certainly does little to alter the meaning of the passage.¹²

More notably, we find that D (fifth c.) moves verse 5 down so that it follows the conclusion of the second Sabbath account in verse 10; such a change would certainly bind the two pericopes much more closely together. Furthermore, D also inserts a large block of unique material immediately following verse 4: *Τῇ αὐτῇ ἡμέρᾳ θεασάμενός τινα ἐργαζόμενον τῷ σαββάτῳ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, ἄνθρωπε, εἰ μὲν οἶδας τί ποιεῖς, μακάριος εἶ· εἰ δὲ μὴ οἶδας, ἐπικατάρατος καὶ παραβάτης εἶ τοῦ νόμου* (“The same day he saw someone working on the Sabbath, and he said to him, ‘Man, you are blessed if you know what you are doing; but if you do not know, you are an accursed lawbreaker.’”).¹³ Meyer regards this as “an interpolated fragment of a true tradition,” saying that, “in substance it certainly bears the stamp of genius, and is sufficiently liberal-minded to admit of its being *original*, even although it is not *genuine*.”¹⁴ While such enthusiasm probably goes beyond the textual warrant, Meyer may in fact have a point: the presence of such a reading points suggests that at least some in the early Christian community understood Jesus' actions to be in tension with the Law – somehow he is both lawbreaker and lawkeeper at the same time. Nevertheless, while such an understanding may fit with the overall intent of the passage, we clearly lack the textual evidence needed to justify adopting this reading.

⁸ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. 201.

⁹ Leaney, *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*. 130.

¹⁰ Henry Alford, however, seems to call such a conclusion into question: “It is very uncertain whether the action mentioned here [in Lk 6:1-5] is included in the prohibition [of Lev 23:14].” (Alford, *The Greek New Testament*. 492-493).

¹¹ Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary (WBC)*, Luke 1-9:20. 256. Emphasis mine.

¹² Note that there are a few late manuscripts (700, 1006, *l*, 859) which omit the entire phrase *καὶ ἔδωκεν τοῖς μετ’ αὐτοῦ* altogether. I adopt the standard USB reading here.

¹³ The only other textual support for this reading is found in it^d.

¹⁴ Meyer, *MCNT*. 331.

To summarize, then, we find no compelling deviations from the standard USB reading of this passage, although we do note that certain variants may suggest a line of early Christian interpretation which views Jesus' actions in contravention to the Mosaic Law. With this in mind, we turn to the content of the passage and the context in which it is presented.

Context & Content

In terms of basic context, most commentators seem to treat this passage with some measure of independence from the surrounding narrative; they see it as more or less standing on its own. Nolland, however, finds a basic cohesion in 5:1 – 6:16, noting this larger block falls naturally into seven sections where the first three units are demarcated by *ἐγένετο* (“it happened”) + *καί* (“and”) (cf. 5:1, 12, 17) and the last three units are demarcated by *ἐγένετο* (“it happened”) + infinitive (cf. 6:1, 6, 12).¹⁵ Nolland strengthens his argument by noting that there is a parallel between linked healing incidents in positions two (5:12-16) and three (5:17-26) and linked Sabbath incidents in positions five (6:1-5) and six (6:6-11); thus, the arrangement forms a chiasmic structure in which the emphasis falls on the fourth unit. Accordingly, “these Sabbath episodes need to be viewed in light of the central unit 5:27-39 and in particular relation to the theme of the new and the old.”¹⁶

While such an approach strives to guide our interpretation by placing 6:1-5 in the larger context, we need to be cautious in adopting Nolland's structure – *ἐγένετο* is actually used throughout the gospel; how do we know the chiasm only spans these passages? Furthermore, we can observe another Sabbath parallel in 4:16-30 (where Jesus quotes Isaiah 61:1-2 and then states, “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (4:21)) and again in 4:31-37 (where Jesus casts out a demon). Both of these events occur on the Sabbath. In the first there is a claim of messianic authority; in the second, there is a miraculous work to authenticate that claim. We could apply this same pattern to the Sabbath accounts in 6:1-6 and 6:6-11. Viewed in this light, the cohesive block may well encompass all of chapters 4-6, and Nolland's conclusions regarding 5:27-39 may be misplaced.¹⁷

In general, we can note that the thrust of 6:1-5 seems to focus on Jesus' authority; after all, he concludes by saying “*The Son of Man is the lord of the Sabbath*” (6:5).¹⁸ Indeed, while the word ‘authority’ (*ἐξουσία*) is not actually present in the passage at hand, it represents a significant theme in Luke (occurring some 16 times). Furthermore, Jesus' debate with the Pharisees in the wheat field clearly centers on “what is lawful on the Sabbath” (*ἔξεστιν τοῖς σάββασι*); because the Scriptures do not clearly delineate precisely what constitutes ‘work’ and ‘rest,’ men must necessarily *interpret* God's commands. As the keeping of the Sabbath becomes a characteristic

¹⁵ Nolland, *WBC*. 253. The seven units are: 5:1-11, 5:12-16, 5:17-26, 5:27-39, 6:1-5, 6:6-11, and 6:12-16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁷ Immediately after an initial temptation (4:1-13), we find a summary of Jesus ministry (4:14-15) expressed in concepts of power, reports, teaching, synagogues, and glory. What follows then in 4:16 – 6:11 may well form an extended set of illustrative sequences, capped on both ends by Sabbath claimed followed immediately by Sabbath authentication (in which a great work is performed to validate the preceding claim). This whole section culminates with Jesus calling the 12 disciples (6:12-16) and then delivering the sermon on the mount (6:17-49). I am not insisting that this structure was necessarily envisioned by Luke; rather, I am merely pointing out that Nolland's choice of literary units may be somewhat arbitrary (and thus his conclusion would not necessarily follow).

¹⁸ Bock and others note that *κύριός* is placed in the emphatic position here (cf. Bock, *BECNT*. 527).

marker of the Jewish identity, the question of authoritative interpretation will become paramount; for Jesus, the heart of the matter is “Who interprets the Sabbath law correctly?”¹⁹

This leads us to look at the content of the passage: what *is* going on here? Verse 1 provides the setting: as Jesus is passing through grain fields; his disciples – and by implication, Jesus himself²⁰ – are pulling off heads of wheat and eating them. To a modern observer, such actions seem casual enough; in the eyes of ancient Jews, however, the matter is far from innocent. Bock summarizes the situation: “The eating of grain from the field in and of itself was not the problem, since Deut 23:25 allowed for such a situation for anyone. The problem was engaging in this activity on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11)”²¹ Green concurs, pointing out that it “is not *what* the disciples are doing, but *when* they are doing it.”²² Indeed, in the immediate context of 6:1-11 we find six references to the ‘Sabbath’ (vss. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9) and another three references to what is ‘lawful’ (vss. 2, 4, 9).²³

It may be tempting to try and soften the force of ‘lawful.’ While *ἔξεστιν* may at times mean simply ‘fitting’ or ‘permissible’ (cf. Ezra 4:14; Mt 20:15), the gospel context here clearly requires the full force of ‘legality’ (cf. Mt 14:4, 19:3, 22:17, 27:6; John 5:10, 18:31; Acts 16:21; 1 Cor 6:12, 10:23). We must remember that the Jews knew no church-state distinction²⁴ – the “religious/moral” laws set forth in Torah would have held the highest significance for them. In the eyes of God, profaning the Sabbath was a capital offense (cf. Ex 31:14).

The Pharisees clearly view Jesus’ actions as contravening God’s Sabbath law – he is doing something *illegal* in God’s economy. Of course, the matter is not obvious, because the fourth commandment does not speak explicitly to every situation:

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 to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates (Ex 20:8-10).

Nothing is said here about plucking a few handfuls of wheat. As Luke Johnson notes, it is harder to determine what constitutes “work” than it is to delineate “rest.”²⁵ While God’s commandments are often quite specific, there are nevertheless many unique situations which are not explicitly

¹⁹ Green, *NICNT*. 252.

²⁰ Some might try to argue that even if the disciples actions do in fact violate the fourth commandment, Jesus himself is not culpable since he does not engage in the activity. Such an argument fails to recognize that in supporting his disciples against the Pharisees, Jesus is giving tacit approval of their behavior; this would have rendered him just as guilty in the eyes of the law. For all practical purposes, Jesus is participating in this Sabbath activity – indeed, this is precisely Luke’s point.

²¹ Bock, *BECNT*. 522.

²² Green, *NICNT*. 253.

²³ *Ibid.* 251.

²⁴ I am not suggesting that the Jews held the Roman laws to be of the same authority as Torah; rather, I am saying that in the ideal of Jewish autonomy, there was no sacred-secular distinction; the Jewish probably did not conceive of a threefold division in the law (moral, ceremonial, and civic). For them, all three were one. Our modern mindset presents a marked contrast: we like to say “you cannot legislate morality” and assume that only the civic carries a weight of “legality.” Consequently, we tend to under-appreciate the weight and significance of Sabbath observance.

²⁵ Johnson, *Sacra Pagina, The Gospel of Luke*. 101.

covered. Ancient Jews – taking the obligation quite seriously – sought to apply the law to everyday life. In the case of the Sabbath, Bock notes that the Mishnah prohibits thirty-nine tasks: “According to this detailed and specific list, the disciples were reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing food – a quadruple violation!”²⁶ Sabbath meals were to be prepared ahead of time precisely to avoid this type of problem (cf. Jub. 2:19, 50:3,8-13).²⁷ The Pharisees seem to be taking God’s law much more seriously than Jesus and his disciples.

Most commentators seem to agree with Nolland, who argues that it is likely neither Jesus nor the early church agreed with the Pharisee’s interpretation.²⁸ Green, however, emphasizes that “the point of this pericope is not to pit the alleged legalism of the Pharisees (and scribes) over against the libertinism of Jesus.”²⁹ It appears that Luke is interested in illustrating something else. Of course, this raises the question of Jesus’ intention as well. It seems highly significant that he does *not* respond by saying, “Look, you legalists have *misinterpreted* the commandment; I am not *really* breaking God’s law.” Instead, Jesus responds by identifying himself with David (1 Sam 21:1-6), and then (audaciously) declaring David’s own activities to be illegal as well. What is the rationale behind this analogy?

There are several points worth noting here. First, Johnson asserts that Luke’s use of *οὐδέ* sharpens Jesus’ response to the point of rebuke: the Pharisee’s should have known better than to voice such a criticism.³⁰ This suggests that Jesus was not caught off guard by the encounter – his decision to eat on the Sabbath in sight of the Pharisees was intentionally calculated to provoke a challenge; Jesus has a point he wishes to convey.

Second, the connection with David is not coincidental. Green points out that Luke may be portraying Jesus as assuming the prestige of David,³¹ and Johnson suggests that we find here “the first narrative echo of the angel’s promise to Mary that Jesus would inherit the ‘throne of his father David’” (cf. 1:32).³² While later Christians would have been much more likely to see Jesus as the ‘Greater David,’ the Pharisees certainly would not have viewed him in this light. Consequently, Jesus’ analogy must hold on a more basic level. For Jesus, the initial point of contact seems to be the Sabbath. The OT account does not explicitly state that the Davidic parallel occurred on the Sabbath, but rabbinic tradition held this to be the case,³³ and Jesus uses this commonality to establish a connection. A further point of relation can be seen in the hunger – both Jesus’ disciples and David’s companions are ‘hungry’ (cf. 6:3, Mt 12:1). Finally, Jesus’ use of *οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ* (“those with him”) is also significant; Jesus is not merely drawing a parallel between himself and David – he is saying that just as there was a sanctifying connection between David and his men, so also with Jesus and his disciples. In sum, then, Jesus appears to be claiming more than a casual resemblance to David.

²⁶ Bock, *BECNT*. 523. Bock also notes that ironically, “later Judaism would not have had a problem with their action as long as a tool was not used to prepare the food.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 523.

²⁸ Nolland, *WBC*. 256.

²⁹ Green, *NICNT*. 252.

³⁰ Johnson, *Sacra Pagina*. 101.

³¹ Green, *NICNT*. 253.

³² Johnson, *Sacra Pagina*. 101.

³³ Leaney, *Luke*. 131.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that David is clearly portrayed as engaging in illegal activity. Bock notes that while some rabbis attempted to exonerate David, “such an approach...cannot explain the priest’s question or the language of 1 Sam 21:6.”³⁴ David asks to eat the bread of presence – something which is explicitly permitted for the priests alone (cf. Lev 24:5-9). Ahimilech would not have hesitated unless there was something highly unusual in David’s request. Furthermore, Jesus himself clearly states that David’s action were contrary to the law: the Pharisees say, “why do you do what is *οὐκ ἔξεστιν* (*not lawful*) on the Sabbath,” to which Jesus replies, “for the same reason that David did what was *οὐκ ἔξεστιν* (*not lawful*.)” By law, only the priests have the right to eat this bread. Bock summarizes the matter well: “In effect, the argument becomes, ‘If you condemn my disciples on this one, you also condemn David and his men!’”³⁵ Yet if David is technically a lawbreaker, why is he is never declared guilty for his actions. How can this be?

At this point, many commentators draw a surprising conclusion: David (and thus Jesus) did not *really* break the law. Nolland summarizes three options for understanding the correlation between Jesus’ and David’s actions: 1) David demonstrates the Pharisees simply have the wrong interpretation of the law; 2) David, because of his special place in the purpose of God was free from the restraints of the law; 3) David only looked like he was breaking the law.³⁶ Not surprisingly, Nolland favors for the latter option. Bock opts for something similar:

Jesus advocates a *hierarchical ethic*, and David’s example is his defense: *ceremonial restrictions of law are to give way to human need*. The law should not restrict people in their basic tasks, but should encourage them, in the case of the Sabbath, to honor the day. There are situations in which the law can be waived or transcended.³⁷

So also Norval Geldenhuys, who states:

The keeping of the Sabbath had degenerated into deadly *formalism*...In this reply Jesus lays down the principle that *no ceremonial provision must stand in the way of providing for the essential needs of life*. The spirit of the Sabbath observance must not lead to an unnecessary burden being imposed on those who keep it. Just as the conduct of David was not against the spirit of the divine Sabbath laws, so likewise the behaviour of Jesus’ disciples on the Sabbath is not sinful, because the eating of the corn-ears was *necessary* for their *physical well being*.³⁸

In a nutshell, most Christians assume that both David and Jesus cannot actually be breaking the law; there must be some mitigating circumstance, which is then located in “human need” (the definition of which happens to be conveniently vague). Unfortunately, such an interpretation fails to do justice to God’s word on at least two essential counts.

First, it fails to take the OT commandments seriously enough. God explicitly stated that the bread of Presence was only for the priests, and He as Lawgiver provided no exception clauses.

³⁴ Bock, *BECNT*. 524.

³⁵ Bock, *BECNT*. 525.

³⁶ Nolland, *WBC*. 257.

³⁷ Bock, *BECNT*. 525. Emphasis mine.

³⁸ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*. 200. Emphasis mine.

David really was breaking God's direct commandment (and I would argue this is precisely Jesus' point). God is equally concerned about Sabbath observance: it is not even permissible to build a fire on the Sabbath (Ex 35:2). We would do well to remember the events of Num 15:32-41, where a man caught gathering sticks on a Sabbath is stoned to death. He certainly seems to have as much of a claim to "human need" as David did – why then did God order his execution?

Second, this interpretation also fails to take Luke's account seriously enough. Jesus and his disciples may have been hungry, but certainly mere hunger does not constitute 'necessity for physical well being.' Is it really possible they *could not* deny themselves for a mere 8-10 hours for the sake of honoring God's law?³⁹ Likewise, how do we explain the pericope that follows in 6:6-11? The Pharisees seem to have a point – the man with a withered hand (6:6) is in no impending danger; neither is the woman who has had a disabling spirit for eighteen years (13:10-17). Neither situation seems correlative with the ox fallen into the well (14:5).

To be fair, the Synoptic parallels do expand Jesus' response: Mark emphasizes David's *need* (Mk 2:25), adding, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*" (Mk 2:27); Matthew appends the statement, "*If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.*" (Mt 12:7). Both of these expanded readings add credence to the common interpretation that there are mitigating circumstances. It is important to remember, however, that we are dealing with Luke, who chooses NOT to add these details. We are most interested in Luke's form here. We are not trying to conjecture back to the bare historical fact; rather, we want to understand how Luke differs from the other accounts so that we can properly understand his intention. If anything, Luke seems to intentionally heighten the difficulty of Jesus statements; he does not seek to soften the blow or lessen the sting. I believe this is intentional, but to make sense of it we will need another way of understanding the parallel between David and Jesus.

Synthesis & Reconstruction

Luke's account contains several details worth observing. First, we should recognize that the force of Jesus argument hinges on his identity: "*The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath*" (6:5). Jesus cannot merely be arguing against dead formalism (as Geldenhuys suggests) – he does not say, "You misunderstand the law;" rather, he says, "You don't know who I am!" The answer Jesus gives can ONLY work for the Son of Man;⁴⁰ no one else can say what he says. What makes his disciples' actions legal is the fact that they are *with Jesus*, who is lord of the Sabbath. Likewise, David's companions are also blameless because they are *with David*. Bock correctly identifies this relationship: "the king is a *representative* figure. Jesus' claim to be Son of Man gives the term a representative sense... Son of Man need not be explicitly messianic to make the point; it only needs to be representative."⁴¹ This concept of representation should be the first sign that Jesus actions carry eschatological significance.

This idea of eschatological intent fits well in the broader context: Luke is writing with a distinctly christological focus,⁴² so we should not be surprised to see him emphasize the person

³⁹ Remember, the Jewish Sabbath ended at sunset. They would then be free to prepare and eat an evening meal.

⁴⁰ Bock contends 'Son of Man' is not actually messianic here (cf. Bock, *BECNT*. 526). While I generally agree with his reasoning, my argument is not strictly dependant on his understanding.

⁴¹ Ibid. 527

⁴² Ibid. 526. The work of Messiah (the Christ) is fundamentally eschatological.

and work of Christ. Interestingly, Rabbi Jacob Neusner notices this very thing as he comments on Matthew's recounting of this incident. Neusner keys on Jesus' statement that David "*entered the house of God*" (6:4, Mt 12:4), as well as his conclusion that "*something greater than the temple is here*" (Mt 12:6). For Neusner, Jesus is eschatologically redefining the temple itself:

When, therefore, Jesus says that something greater than the Temple is here, he can only mean that he and his disciples may do on the Sabbath what they do because they stand in place of the priests in the temple: the holy place has shifted, now being formed by a circle made up of master and his disciples.⁴³

In other words, Jesus justifies his Sabbath actions by noting that such deeds are legal within the house of God; consequently, the only way they can also be legal for Jesus in the midst of a grain field is if the temple itself has moved – the temple no longer resides on Mt Zion; the temple is where Jesus is. *Jesus is claiming to be the true temple of God*. Neusner recognizes (perhaps more clearly than most evangelicals) the significance of Jesus' actions, and he rejects him as Messiah for this very reason.

While Luke's account omits this temple reference, the same line of reasoning may be applied here. Jesus himself tells us that David did what was unlawful, "*except for the priests alone*" (6:4). At the same time, while David is clearly guilty of breaking the law, he is nevertheless "guiltless" before God (cf. Mt 12:5,7). How can this be? Taking our cue from Neusner, perhaps Jesus is suggesting that David is not merely a king; he must also be a priest! Indeed, if we look closely, we can find a number of occasions where David engages in priestly behavior: when Saul falls into his hands, David actually *intercedes* on Saul's behalf, sparing his life (cf. 1 Sam 24, 26); when the ark is brought back to Jerusalem, it is David who goes before it, *dancing* with all his might, wearing a *linen ephod*, and *offering sacrifices* every six steps and *blessing the people* (2 Sam 6:13-15, 16-18); when the angel of YHWH is striking down the Israelites for David's sin, it is David who *intercedes on their behalf*, purchasing what will later become the temple mount and *offering burnt offerings* for the people there (2 Sam 24).⁴⁴ The NT expands the analogy even further, noting that David is also a prophet (Acts 2:29-31). The point here is simple: David is not just a king of Israel – he occupies a special, representative position, serving in the tri-fold capacity of prophet, priest and king.⁴⁵ In short, he plays an ectypal role, pointing to messianic archetype who will come in the 'Day of the LORD'.

Of course what is true of David must also be true of Jesus – that is the whole point of Jesus' analogy; Jesus as 'Greater David' embodies all three roles of prophet, priest, and king in their realized eschatological fullness. Green finds it highly significant that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by quoting from Is 61:1,2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the

⁴³ Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*. 82-83.

⁴⁴ I suspect this whole concept of "David as priest" would be a fascinating area for further study. Special thanks to Marilyn Cryder and Molly Routson for suggesting several of these priestly examples.

⁴⁵ I am not saying that David fulfills these three offices in the same way that Jesus does; rather, I am suggesting that David's priestly and prophetic roles offer an eschatological glimpse of what is yet to come.

blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Lk 4:18-19)

When Jesus concludes by saying “*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (4:21), he is inaugurating the “day” of God’s favor.⁴⁶ Here we find clear allusions to God’s original Sabbath rest promised in Gen 1; *eschatological restoration* means receiving the blessedness that Adam failed to gain. The miracles which follow dramatically illustrate the reality of this long-expected kingdom breaking into the existing order. Such an understanding shines new light on Luke’s gospel recollection: when Jesus heals sickness, satisfies hunger, and preaches the Good News, he is not just addressing physical needs – he is bringing eschatological fulfillment. The disciples’ hunger and need serve as “just cause” for Jesus’ Sabbath breaking because they point to the reality of an eschatological need, just as the signs and wonders point to the reality of eschatological blessing. And if the Sabbath signifies eschatological blessing, how much more appropriate that these illustrations of God’s favor should take place *on the Sabbath!*

To return to our pericope then, Jesus must be seen as a “lawbreaker” in the same sense that David was a “lawbreaker” – if he is anyone other than the federal representative of God, he must be in the wrong and deserves to be executed according to the righteous requirement of the law (Ex 35:2). We know, however, that he is the guiltless ‘Greater David,’ because “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (Jn 9:33). Jesus deliberately sets aside the Sabbath law (in a very provocative manner!) to demonstrate two principles: first, that he has the authority to do so (as lawgiver); second, that the new age of God’s favor (where Jesus is our representative lawkeeper) has now been instituted. Jesus’ healing in 6:6-11 validates his claims in 6:1-5: Jesus can break the law and yet be guiltless because Jesus himself is the new law, which God promised to write upon the hearts of the people (Jer 31:31-33).⁴⁷ When Jesus claims to be the giver of eternal life (Jn 5:21-24), he is offering himself as a replacement of both Sabbath and law.⁴⁸ The author of Hebrews leverages this theme when he says, “*So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God*” (Heb 4:9). Jesus can subsume the law because he alone has fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law (cf. Rom 8:4), and in so doing he has made a place for us to enter by faith (Heb 9:11-15, 10:1-23).

It should be obvious from this that Christ alone has the right and authority to set aside the requirements of the law; the argument cannot be universalized to apply to people in general. Where does this leave us? Are we still under the obligation of the law? We respond by recalling that the disciples were justified because they were *with Jesus*. The same situation applies for us: in Christ, all the demands of the law are now met. As long as we are *in him*, we no longer have any obligation to the old covenant law (which he has fulfilled on our behalf); we are only obligated under the terms and conditions of the new covenant (written upon our hearts). This is how Jesus can say he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). Similarly, this explains how Paul can proclaim, “*you are not under law, but grace*” (Rom 6:14); “*now that faith*

⁴⁶ Green, *NICNT*. 252.

⁴⁷ Jesus hints at this lawgiving role when he says things like, “You have heard it said... [OT Quote]...but I say to you...[words of Jesus]” (cf. Mt 5-7).

⁴⁸ Dr. Daniel McCartney, class lecture NT 211, 11.29.2004. cf. Is 56, where God promises eunuchs (dry trees) who keep his Sabbath “a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Is 56:1). See also passages like Ps 119:105, where the psalmist says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my feet.” For the Jew, Torah and Sabbath keeping are at the heart of life.

has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the law]” (Gal 3:24-25); Christ Jesus is our peace, he has made us one new man “*by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances*” (Eph 2:14-15). This is how the author of Hebrews can assert, “*when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well*” (Heb 7:12); because “*the law is but a shadow of the good things to come...He abolishes the first in order to establish the second*” (Heb 10:1,10).⁴⁹

In sum, Christ our mediator has accomplished what the law was powerless to achieve: “*Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.*” (Acts 13:38-39) He has become our lawkeeper, and he alone can give us rest. Truly, Jesus is Lord of both the Sabbath and the law.

⁴⁹ None of this should be construed as suggesting we are now free *from* law, *to* sin (cf. Rom 6:15). Molly Routson offers an excellent insight: “[Although] the obligations of the new covenant look different in many ways from the old covenant, the foundation of grace is still the same...[In many ways] the new covenant obligations are actually *stronger*, in the sense that we have the Spirit of Christ in our hearts enabling us to love God and to love neighbor in ways that were never possible for old covenant believers.” (personal conversation, 11.30.2004).

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