

THE COMMUNITY OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AND THE SABBATH

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Several gospels were written by Christian communities for whom the Sabbath seems to have still been relevant. Still attached to the Jewish synagogue, these communities remained deeply interested in the appropriate mode of Sabbath keeping (cf. Mk 12), or presuppose a continued relevance of the Sabbath for Christians (cf. Matt. 24:20). The Gospel of John, on the other hand, was written last of the four, and seems to reflect the views of a period and community that had already abandoned the Sabbath as a “Jewish” institution.

Us and Them

The Fourth Gospel references the “day of Preparation” three times, all within the same chapter: Jn 19:14,31,42. Assuming that in each case, the sixth day of the calendar week is strictly intended,¹ our attention turns to the last occurrence of the phrase: “And so, because it is the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (Jn 19:42).”

Intriguingly, the text adds the qualifier “Jewish” (των ιουδαιων; lit., “of the Jews”) to its reference to the “day of Preparation.” Elsewhere in the gospel, the same qualifier indicates observances particular to Jewish religious practice, including: purification rites (2:6), festivals (2:13; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55), and burial customs (19:40). Naturally, this categorization expresses a certain distance between the Johannine community and a given observance; the community fails to appropriate the particular custom as its own, but assigns it to “the Jews” (an external bloc²).

1. The premise that John 19 uses παρασκευην as an exclusive, technical designation for the day preceding the seventh-day sabbath finds a convincing defense in the third chapter of: Bacchiocchi, Samuele, *The Time of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection*, Biblical Perspectives 3, Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1983.

2. John’s gospel asserts a permanent separation between “the Jews” and the followers of Christ, “for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue”

Evidently, such was also the case with regards to the “day of Preparation.” The same chapter already referenced the day twice before without labeling it “Jewish” (19:14,31). Therefore, that qualification was unnecessary in 19:42 (as if required to introduce the custom to a gentile readership); it appears gratuitously. The Johannine community categorizes the institution as a Jewish particularity, akin to “the burial custom of the Jews” cited two verses earlier (19:40).

The implications of this dissociation are obvious. The anticipatory function of the sixth day (as a preparation for the seventh) is affirmed in the first recorded instance of human sabbath observance (Ex 16:22-24). Weekly sabbath observance demands those activities proper to the “day of Preparation.” Consequently, the Johannine community’s detachment from the “day of Preparation” (as a custom specific to Judaism) signifies their abandonment of the sabbath itself.³ Herold Weiss concurs: “in the entombment and embalming scene . . . sabbath observance is viewed as a concern for the ‘Jews,’” not Christians.⁴

Sabbath Discussions

The roots of this stance appear in other passages within the gospel, most especially, those describing Sabbath healings. In John 5, Christ heals a cripple, commanding him to “walk.”⁵ He further, and without a clear rationale, instructs the man: “take your mat” (John 5:9).⁶ Since the carrying

(9:22). They constitute a distinct group, whom Christ refers to in the third person (13:33). Thus, Raymond Brown concludes: “In its later stage, the Johannine community seems to have regarded expulsion from the synagogue as meaning that they no longer could look on themselves as Jews the (Johannine) disciples of Jesus differ religiously, if not necessarily ethnically or geographically [from “the Jews”].” (Brown, Raymond E., *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. Francis J. Maloney, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, New York: Doubleday, 2003.)

3. Manns, F., *John and Jamnia: How the Break Occurred Between Jews and Christians, c. 80–100 A.D.*, tr. Mildred Duel and Marina Riadi, Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1988, 30.

4. Weiss, Herold. “The Sabbath in the Fourth Gospel.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 11:2 (1991), 319. Weiss’ paper explores other indications that the Johannine community had abandoned the observation of the literal seventh day, in favor of a transformed, “eschatological present” sabbatarian theology, with which I disagree in some respects.

5. Is the cripple a symbol of sabbatical inactivity? The blindness of the healed man in ch. 9 is linked to the “blindness” of the Pharisees 9:40-1.

of loads was forbidden on the Sabbath (Jer 17:21,27), the man's fulfillment of Christ's command draws the initial ire of the Jews, who reprimand him: "it is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat" (5:10). The man responds, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk'" (5:11). In this light, Christ's command that the man carry his mat in violation of the Sabbath command represents a calculated attempt to provoke the Jews.

When confronted about this slight of the Sabbath, and his decision to heal on the day, Christ asserts that the work of the Father and Son knows no interruption (5:17).⁷ He also ridicules the Jews for having "set [their] hope" on Moses, that is, the Law (5:45, cf. Abraham in Jn 8:56-8), which in fact, testifies of Him. These statements suggest Christ understood his ministry as indifferent to, or greater than, the claims of the Sabbath, a view epitomized in 5:18, which records: "the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only *breaking the Sabbath*, but was also calling God his own Father." Do these words merely present the accusation of the Jews,⁸ or is this the Johannine community's view? The discourse that follows endorses the claim that the Son is equal to the Father in honor and power (5:21-23, 26). Therefore, the conclusion that Christ "was. . . breaking the Sabbath" is likely also that of the Johannine community.⁹

Christ further comments on this miracle in 7:19-24. There, he points out that at least one command of the Mosaic Law overrules the Sabbath: circumcision (7:22-23). If even the fulfillment of the "the law of Moses" requires one to occasionally do a work on the Sabbath, how much more can Christ's ministry overrule its demands?

6. Superfluous actions or demands seem to emphasize Christ's prerogatives and authority in the gospel. For the sake of comparison, Christ gratuitously postpones his trip to Bethany, precisely, it seems to allow Lazarus to die (11:6,21). Thus, the Son receives greater glory through the healing (11:4).

7. Loshe, Eduard, "Sabbaton," *TDNT*, 27-28. Weiss disputes Loshe's reading on the basis that "until now" in 5:17 speaks of "duration" or "constancy" rather than "interruptions" (Weiss, Herold, *A Day of Gladness* [Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2003], 102). However, constancy is defined by the very lack of interruptions.

8. Brown, Raymond, E., *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, Anchor Bible 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 214.

9. Of note, Loshe further suggests that the linguistic force of the verb *luo* ("to loose," "to break") would be better captured in the translation "abolished." Christ's activity would represent an abolishment the Sabbath (Loshe, 27-28).

It is possible 7:23 attempts to justify Christ's actions on the basis of the healing or restorative character of his works. However, it would be unwise to limit Christ's freedom to overrule the Sabbath to that factor. As noted earlier, not all the apparent violations of the Sabbath are logically connected to the necessities of the healing. Furthermore, the Christological discussions following the Sabbath healings of chs. 5,7,9 indicate the Sabbath is not so much under discussion in these passages as the supremacy of the Son.¹⁰ Thus, the gospel does not so much concern itself with the appropriate manner of Sabbath observance as with the authority of Christ to dispense with the demands of the Sabbath altogether, and simply "break" them.

These themes are reinforced in ch. 9, when Christ performs another Sabbath healing (9:14). This miracle is effected by the gratuitous manufacture of mud on the Sabbath (9:6)—another seemingly unnecessary action, which poses an obstacle for the Pharisees (9:14). The Pharisees repeat the claim that Christ "does not observe the sabbath" (9:16). They also state their allegiance to Moses: "you are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses" (9:28), in terms evocative of Christ's reprimand in 5:45-47.

Within the context of this Sabbath healing, Christ tells his disciples they must work as long as it is "day"; it is at "night," however, "when no one can work," a statement (negatively) evocative of the Sabbath commandment (9:4; cf. Ex. 20:9). This "night" corresponds to a time when Christ, "the light of the world" is no longer "in the world" (9:4-5) or "in" the human person (11:9-10; cf. 13:30). It is marked by futility (cf. 21:3-7). Thus, in the theology of the Fourth gospel, the Sabbath does not define the limits of work and inactivity, but Christ. He constructs a new, spiritual order of time, irrespective of the literal rising and setting of the sun.

The association of the disciples with the work of the Father and Son, which respects no Sabbath (9:4; cf. 5:17), suggests their similar freedom to overrule the Sabbath. Much as they learned to transcend space in their worship (4:21,23), it seems the Johannine community at last came to transcended the restrictions of time.¹¹

Retiring the Sabbath

No doubt, the rhetoric of chs. 5,7,9 undermined the Sabbath in the Christian imagination. As evident in Jn 19, the Johannine community apparently extrapolated these ideas further, and ceased to observe the Sabbath altogether. Thus, the Fourth Gospel reflects the perspective of a

10. Weiss, *A Day of Gladness*, 101,3. Mk 2:23-28 argues from the premise that human necessity always overrules Sabbath observance to the conclusion that Christ has authority over the Sabbath.

11. Weiss, "The Sabbath in the Fourth Gospel," 320.

Christian community that had forsaken the practice of weekly Sabbath observance. After their final disenfranchisement from the synagogue (cf. 9:22), these Christians gradually classified Sabbath-keeping among those practices proper to the former religion. Catholic Christians follow their example when referring to the ceremonial observance of the seventh day as the “Jewish Sabbath” (following the “Jewish day of Preparation”).

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