

The Sabbath in the Gospel of John¹

by Jon Paulien

Introduction

The Sabbath in the Gospel of John is of interest to this project² for at least two reasons. First, the Sabbath occurs in four different locations in the Gospel of John.³ No study of the Sabbath in the New Testament would be complete without an examination of these texts. Second, John 5:17-18 provides, in the minds of many Sunday-keeping scholars, the definitive evidence that Jesus abolished the Sabbath as a requirement for those who follow him.

We will examine, therefore, the various occurrences of the Sabbath in the Gospel of John, with special emphasis on the Sabbath conflict miracles in chapters five and nine.⁴ We will do so in conversation with earlier scholarship, including representatives of those who disagree regarding the ongoing validity of the Sabbath for Christians.

¹This chapter is a revised and updated version of the article of the same name in (Davidson festschrift).

²The purpose of this book is understanding and promoting the Sabbath as of ongoing validity for Christians today.

³Scholars have noted that John's treatment of the Sabbath is quite different from that of the other gospels. See A. J. Droge, "Sabbath Work/Sabbath Rest: Genesis, Thomas, John," *History of Religions* 47 (November 2007/February 2008, Numbers 2/3): 128; and the literature cited in Henry Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God: How Jesus Came to Personify the Sabbath* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), 204-265.

⁴These two Sabbath miracles are unique to the Gospel of John and were probably recorded in the Gospel because they highlight the theme of creation. In the first account, the miracle is effected by the spoken word (John 5:8, 19, cf. Gen 1:3, 6, 9, etc., Ps 33:6, 9), in the second, by handling the dust of the earth (John 9:6, 32, cf. Gen. 2:7). See Abraham Terian, "Creation in Johannine Theology," in *Good News in History: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, edited by Ed L. Miller (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), 54, 57.

The Four Sabbath Texts in John

The first reference to the Sabbath is found in John 5:9 and following, at the heart of the story about a paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda. Healing the man gets both Jesus and the former paralytic in trouble. The second reference, in 7:22-23, is related to the first. Jesus briefly draws the attention of “the Jews” back to the Sabbath healing of chapter five.

The third reference to the Sabbath is found in John 9:14, 16. There Jesus heals a man born blind on the Sabbath day, using a poultice made from mud. The healed man not only comes to believe in Jesus, but argues ably in His behalf. The fourth and final reference to the Sabbath in John is found in the story of the crucifixion, John 19:31. It notes the ritual concern of the Jews that the victims of the crucifixion not hang on the cross during Sabbath hours.⁵

John 5:17-18 as Alleged Evidence for the Abolition of the Sabbath

John 5:17-18 is seen as evidence for the early abolition of the Sabbath by a number of NT scholars. Nevertheless, there is little agreement among them in terms of how the passage should be read. Barnabas Lindars,⁶ Rudolf Bultmann,⁷ and Heather McKay,⁸ for example, argue from

⁵But note the comments of Weiss on this text: Herold Weiss, “The Sabbath in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (2, 1991): 319-320.

⁶Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1972), 218.

⁷Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 246-247.

⁸Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath and Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, vol. 122, edited by R. van den Broek, H. J. W. Drijvers and H. S. Versnel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 148.

John 5:17 that God is not bound to rest on the Sabbath and the same liberty belongs to His Son. Bultmann takes it one step further. He believes that Jesus not only asserted this liberty for Himself, He extended it to those who follow Him, by ordering the healed man to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath (5:8-12).⁹

Paul Jewett, Herold Weiss, Oscar Cullmann, Willy Rordorf and Tony Costa all argue from John 5:17 that the decisive rest of God was not achieved at the end of the first creation. God's work of salvation continued "until now" and was completed in Jesus Christ. The Sabbath, therefore, was a foretaste of the new creation rest in Christ. In fulfilling the ultimate intent of the Sabbath by His redemptive work, Christ set it aside, to be replaced by Sunday or by a daily celebration of redemption.¹⁰

⁹See also Samuele Bacchiocchi, "John 5:17: Negation or Clarification of the Sabbath?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19 (1, Spring 1981): 4-9 and note 11.

The point of John 5:17, according to McKay (148), is that Jesus is equal in authority to God and is therefore above the authority of both Torah and tradition.

¹⁰Paul K. Jewett, *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 84-87; Oscar Cullmann, "Sabbat und Sonntag nach den Johannesevangelium," in *Memoriam, Ernst Lohmeyer* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951), 127-131; idem, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 89-90. Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Era* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 98-100; Tony Costa, "The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20/1 (Spring, 2016), 123-147.

Cullmann's point of view is criticized by Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 2: 1019-1020; see also Weiss, *JBL*, 316.

Weiss (*JBL*, 318-320) seems to hold a similar view, except that the ritual weekly Sabbath is not replaced by Sunday, but by "every" day. For followers of Jesus "every day is a Sabbath" (320), since the Sabbath has been released from the weekly cycle (319).

Though Sturcke is more nuanced than the others, he seems to lean in this direction (264-265). He argues that whether or not the Johannine community had abandoned the Sabbath by the time of writing, the theology adopted in the Gospel would have eventually led them to do so.

A third major approach assumes that John 5:18 completely negates the Sabbath. Rudolf Schnackenburg argues on the basis of the Greek behind “was breaking” (John 5:18, NIV) that Jesus not only violated the Sabbath, but completely abolished it.¹¹ The imperfect (Greek: *eluen*) is past continuous, so Jesus is portrayed as “continually” breaking the Sabbath.¹² Schnackenburg takes the statement of 5:18 at face value. Jesus both made Himself equal with God and consistently broke the Sabbath, which would have major implications for His followers.¹³ Beside these major positions, there are a couple of other Sabbath-abolishing approaches that are too idiosyncratic to have gained wide support.¹⁴

Dale Ratzlaff takes something of an “all of the above” approach.¹⁵ Like Bultmann, he argues that Jesus has a divine right to work on the Sabbath and extends that right to the healed

¹¹“Jesus. . . did away with the Jewish sabbath in a radical manner with all its stipulations.” Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Commentary on Chapters 5-12*, vol. 2 of 3, translated from the German by Kevin Smythe et al, Herder’s Theological Commentary on the New Testament (NY: Herder and Herder, 1968), 97.

¹²Kim Papaioannou, “Jesus and Sabbath Law: A Fresh Look at a Challenging Text,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 20 (1-2, 2009), 244-245.

¹³Ibid. Schnackenburg’s view is criticized by Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1: 645-647.

¹⁴From a postmodern reading of the Gospel of John, Tom Thatcher draws the conclusion that Jesus truly broke the Sabbath in John 9. His “neutral” standpoint toward the perspective of the Gospel, however, causes Him to see Jesus as the chief sinner in the Gospel, which attempts to “trick” the reader into accepting unconditionally the authority of the Gospel and thereby also the authority of Jesus. This strange reading of the Gospel of John is not likely to impact conservative Christians in their attitude toward the Sabbath. See Tom Thatcher, “The Sabbath Trick: Unstable Irony in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 76 (1999): 75-76.

A. J. Droge argues that the Sabbath, according to John 5:17, has not even been established yet, because the creation itself is unfinished and incomplete. The fact that the Father is working implies that the true Sabbath is still future from John’s perspective. See Droge, 129-130.

¹⁵Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ* (Glendale, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 2003), 150-175. Ratzlaff’s work is thoughtful and gives careful attention to an English translation of the

man by ordering him to carry his bedroll.¹⁶ Like Rordorf and others he argues that the primary purpose of the Sabbath law was to point forward to the salvific work of Christ.¹⁷ And like Schnackenburg, he accepts the statements of John 5:18 at face value. Jesus was, in fact, breaking the Sabbath.¹⁸ He unites these arguments with a covenantal perspective¹⁹ that he imports from his study of other parts of Scripture.²⁰

Conclusion

What all these scholars have in common is the belief, as Bacchiocchi puts it, that John 5:17-18 is “an implicit (if not explicit) annulment of the Sabbath commandment.”²¹ Jesus replaces the Sabbath with Sunday or with an ever-present rest in the finished work of Christ. This essay will not attempt a point by point refutation of the arguments offered by these scholars. Instead, we will carefully investigate the Sabbath texts in the Gospel to understand their meaning in their larger context. We will then conclude with the implications of the exegetical analysis for the debate over the ongoing validity of the Sabbath for Christians.

Gospel. He does not, however, deeply engage the scholarly issues and literature. This makes his work less interesting for our purpose than it might otherwise have been.

¹⁶Ibid., 152-154.

¹⁷Ibid., 158-159.

¹⁸Ibid., 155.

¹⁹Ibid., 151, 158.

²⁰Ratzlaff makes no attempt to argue for old and new covenant language within the Gospel of John itself. He simply restates what he has argued on the basis of covenantal language elsewhere in the Bible. His argument in John stands or falls on the validity of these covenantal assumptions, which will be evaluated in other chapters of this book.

²¹Bacchiocchi, *AUSS*, 11.

The Purpose of John's Gospel

We begin our examination of the Sabbath in the Gospel of John with a brief summary of the purpose for which the Gospel was written. Understanding the purpose of the Gospel is crucial to understanding how the Sabbath functions in the places where it appears, particularly in chapter five. Out of the four gospels in the New Testament, only Luke (Luke 1:1-4) and John (John 20:30-31) have clear statements of purpose. It would be foolish to examine the purpose of either gospel without careful attention to the statements of purpose placed in each.

John 20:30-31

John expresses the purpose of his gospel in the following words (John 20:30-31, ESV):

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

We are told here that the events recorded in the Fourth Gospel are selected from a much larger body of events. This purposeful selection is so that the second generation of believers in John's community (those who had no direct contact with eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry) might come to believe in Jesus and experience the kind of life that Jesus bestowed on His disciples.²² The Sabbath miracles chosen by John were designed to serve this purpose.²³ In the Fourth Gospel, it is Jesus' word that heals, not His touch. And the healing often occurs at a considerable distance (John 4:46-54; 9:6-7). This fact would encourage the second generation of Christians

²²Jon Paulien, *John: Jesus Gives Life to a New Generation*, Abundant Life Bible Amplifier, George R. Knight, general editor (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995), 19-23

²³Sturcke, 204.

that Jesus' word in the Gospel is as powerful for them as His physical presence was for the original disciples.²⁴

The Prologue of the Gospel

In the Prologue to John (1:1-18), the author summarizes the main themes of the Gospel. Before Creation, the Word was already in existence (John 1:1a) and was a constant companion of the Father (1:1b, 18). While distinct from "God" (the Father), He completely shared the divine nature (1:1c). The divine identity of Jesus is clearly central to the opening verses of the Gospel.

John then introduces two creation themes that are also central to the Sabbath texts. will be crucial for our main texts. Jesus is the source of both life and light (1:4-5). In the main body of the Gospel He brings life to the paralytic in chapter five and light to the blind man in chapter nine. These stories become real-life parables, demonstrating who Jesus really is and how human beings should regard Him. The fact that both of these healing miracles occur on the Sabbath is a further reminder of the original creation week in Genesis.²⁵

The Prologue (1:1-18) moves to a stirring conclusion in verses 14-18. The Word of God, who was always "with God" (John 1:1-2), who is now again at the Father's side (1:18), is the One who became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). He is one with "God" (the Father) and was sent by the Father to reveal what God is like (John 1:1, 18; 13:1-17; 14:9).²⁶

²⁴Paulien, *John*, 20-21.

²⁵Terian, 54.

²⁶William Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus says and does things that only make sense in the light of His identity in the Prologue. In light of the Prologue, it is clear to the reader why “the Jews” and others in the Gospel had such a hard time understanding many of Jesus’ sayings and actions. While readers know what the Prologue says, the characters in the stories do not.

Conclusion

The immediate purpose of the Gospel of John was to bring a new generation of believers to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:30-31). But in the Prologue, Jesus is clearly more than just the Messiah of Jewish expectation. He is the living embodiment of God the Father (1:1-18). Jesus was sent by the Father to reveal what the Father is like (14:9). So the critical purpose of the Gospel is to portray the full identity of Jesus and, therefore, what God is really like. The body of the Gospel, therefore, portrays human beings in the earthly context constantly grappling with who Jesus really is. It is in the latter context that the Sabbath conflict stories of John 5 and 9 are set.

The Sabbath Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5)

There are 26 healing stories in the four gospels. Jesus took the initiative to heal in only five of these stories, all five of which took place on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14 and parallels, Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-9 and 9:1-34). But there is an additional unique element in these five stories. The focus is not on how the healed person responds to their healing, but on how the

religious leaders respond.²⁷ The healing at the Pool of Bethesda certainly fits that mold (John 5:1-18).

The Preceding Context

The identity of Jesus is at the heart of the narrative in John 1:19 - 4:54. In story after story, the Gospel portrays people wrestling with the issue of who Jesus is and how to explain His words and actions.²⁸ The concluding story of the encounter with the royal official (John 4:46-54) sets the stage for Jesus' encounter with the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-9).²⁹ In both stories Jesus heals through His word rather than His touch.³⁰ These stories are designed to show the second generation of disciples who Jesus really is.

The decisive difference between the two stories is that Jesus' sign in John 5 occurs on the Sabbath. If the healing of the paralytic had occurred on any other day, it would not have caused a stir, any more than the healing of the royal official's son in chapter 4 did (46-54). While the core

²⁷Robin Thompson, "Healing at the Pool of Bethesda: A Challenge to Asclepius?" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 27 (1, 2017): 82.

²⁸Martin Asiedu-Pepurah, *Johannine Sabbath Conflicts as Juridical Controversy*, Wissenschaftlich Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe, edited by Martin Hengel and Otfried Hofius (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Siebeck), 2001), 39-40; Jon Paulien, "Nicodemus," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), volume 4, page 1105-1106.

²⁹See the more detailed parallels in Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 52. Chapters 2-4 also prepare the way for the healing at Bethesda by introducing the themes of temple (John 2:14-17) and water (John 2:6; 3:5; 4:7). The ineffectual healing water at Bethesda (5:2, 7) recalls the ineffectual waters of purification at Cana (2:6), and the mention of the temple (5:14) recalls the earlier cleansing (2:14-17).

³⁰Paulien, *John*, 20-21.

issue of the Gospel has to do with the identity of Jesus, the Sabbath plays a central role in how that issue works itself out in chapter five, as we will see.

An Exegesis of John 5

John 5 begins a new section of the Gospel of John (John, chapters 5-12). It is sometimes called the Festival Cycle (chapters 5-12) because Jesus' signs, and their attendant narratives are set in the context of Jewish festivals. The Festival Cycle develops the theme of increasing opposition to Jesus from the religious leadership.³¹ This section also contains the key Sabbath texts in the Gospel of John (John 5:18; 7:21-24; 9:14-16).

John 5 centers on a story of conflict between Jesus and "the Jews."³² The conflict arises on account of a Sabbath healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-14), which lies today just north of the temple mount in the vicinity of St. Anne's church in Jerusalem.³³ In the story, Jesus picked one man to heal out of a whole crowd of people. It was a man who hadn't sought Jesus

³¹Stephen S. Kim, "The Christological and Eschatological Significance of Jesus' Miracle in John 5," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165 (October - December 2008), 414-415; idem, "The Significance of Jesus' Healing the Blind Man in John 9," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (July-September, 2010): 308, 318; Jacobus Kok, "The Healing of the Blind Man in John," *Journal of Early Christian History* 2 (2, 2012): 47. There is an unnamed feast in John 5:1-47, Passover in 6:1-71, Tabernacles in 7:1 - 10:21 and Dedication or Hanukkah in 10:22-42. The scenes in chapters 11 and 12 occur in anticipation of Jesus' final Passover (John 11:55-56; 12:1; 13:1). Kim suggests (2008: 417; 2010: 309) that the feast of chapter five may be unnamed to highlight the centrality of the Sabbath in the account.

³²See Sturcke (206-207) for evidence that chapter five is a discreet unit somewhat distinct from what precedes and what follows.

³³There is abundant recent analysis of the archaeological evidence for the pool. See James H. Charlesworth, "Jesus Research and Archaeology: A New Perspective," in *Jesus and Archaeology*, edited by James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 34; Urban C. Von Wahlde, "The Pool(s) of Bethesda and the Healing in John 5: A Reappraisal of Research and of the Johannine Text," *Revue Biblique* 116 (1, 2009): 111-136; Thompson, 65-84.

out, who didn't even know Him, and who expressed no faith in Him before being healed.³⁴ Jesus also clearly chose to heal the man on the Sabbath.³⁵ It was not an accident, the timing was deliberate.³⁶ The rabbis allowed for healing on the Sabbath in emergencies, but this was no emergency.³⁷ Since the man had been crippled for thirty-eight years, a day or two's delay for the

³⁴Kok (40) points out that the objects of Jesus' healings were, more often than not, people who were impure or unclean in the temple-oriented system of the time. See the amusing account of the man's unbelief in Michael Card, *The Parable of Joy: Reflections on the Wisdom of the Book of John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 65-67. While the biblical text does not portray the man as having faith in Jesus, Ellen White suggests some level of faith was necessary to his acting on Jesus' command. See Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 203.

³⁵It seems in all four gospels that whenever Jesus takes the initiative in healing someone, the healing comes on a Sabbath! See Paulien, *John*, 119. Jesus initiative in John 5 runs counter to the pattern established in the first two "signs" (water to wine [2:1-11] and royal official's son [4:46-54]) in which a request is made of Jesus that He seems reluctant to fulfill. See Sturcke, 212.

According to Ellen White, Jesus deliberately chose the worst case at the pool to raise the question of what is or is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. *The Desire of Ages*, 206.

³⁶Schnackenburg, 2:97; Tom Wright, *John for Everyone: Part 1, Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK, 2002), 59; Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), vol. 1, 210. Carson underlines this point by noting that the paralyzed man was singularly dull mentally and incapable of taking the initiative in a matter like this. Jesus is clearly the one taking the initiative. See D. A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, edited by D. A. Carson, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 80-81. His pre-destinarian perspective, however, encourages him to think that Jesus was not provoking a confrontation over the Sabbath, but simply carrying out His mission.

³⁷Walter F. Specht, "The Sabbath in the New Testament," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, edited by Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 100. Specht considers Jesus' act an open challenge to rabbinical rules of Sabbath-keeping, nevertheless, he acknowledges that Genesis 2:2 had challenged early Jewish exegetes to allow that for God, with a universe to maintain, there is truly no rest, no Sabbath.

Jewett (39-41) discusses the non-emergency character of this and several other Sabbath healings.

sake of the Sabbath would not have made a major difference.³⁸ Not only that, the carrying of the mat was not crucial to the healing. If Jesus had wanted to avoid controversy, He could have told the man to collect the mat after sundown. In ordering the carrying of the mat, Jesus was clearly setting up a confrontation with the religious authorities.³⁹ He was acting deliberately to make a point here.⁴⁰

The man's responses (John 5:7, 11, 13) make it clear that he had no idea who Jesus was in human terms, much less in the cosmic perspective of the Prologue (John 5:7, 11). In contrast, the reader is well aware of Jesus' divine origin (1:1-2) and miraculous powers (2:1-11; 4:46-54).⁴¹ Taking up the bed roll and walking (John 5:8-9a) was not part of the healing itself, but it was proof that the healing had occurred.⁴² The mention of Sabbath at this point changes the whole direction of the action to follow.⁴³ The fact that this random healing occurred on the

³⁸Keener notes that the rabbis prohibited any action on the Sabbath that could have been done before the Sabbath. See Keener, 1:642 and note 75.

³⁹Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 186-187.

⁴⁰Stephen M. Bryan, "Power in the Pool: The Healing of the Man at Bethesda and Jesus' Violation of the Sabbath (Jn. 5:1-18)" *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2, 2003): 17; Tonstad, 186.

⁴¹Asiedu-Pepurah, 64.

⁴²Asking the man to carry his bed roll may have violated a couple of strictures in the Mishnah (*m. Shabbath* 7:2 and 10:5). See Herbert Danby, editor, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 106, 109. See also Papaioannou, 246-252; Specht, 100; Sturcke, 215, 233; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*, Reading the New Testament Series (NY: Crossroad, 1992), 123.

⁴³Sturcke, 215. Thatcher ("Sabbath Trick," 59-60) considers this late-breaking detail so remarkable he calls it "The Sabbath Trick." The sudden revelation that the healing occurred on a Sabbath undermines the reader's earlier perceptions, forcing a complete change of direction in the reader's impression of the narrative. This technique underlines that the Sabbath is the crucial context in the story.

Sabbath is central to the purpose of this chapter.⁴⁴ The crucial question is: What was that purpose? Was it to demonstrate that Jesus was abolishing the Sabbath, as some scholars have argued, or was it to highlight His identity and mission, the larger purpose of the Gospel?

Unlike the paralytic, who does not know Jesus, the religious leaders believe He is a teacher come from God (John 3:2, by 9:16 they are more divided in their opinions). But like the paralytic, they are ignorant of the divine realities outlined in the Prologue to the Gospel (1:1-18). So in John 5:18 the religious leaders level two distinct charges against Jesus. They accuse him, first of all, of breaking the Sabbath and, second of all, of making Himself equal with God.⁴⁵ Viewed in the larger context of the Gospel, both claims are false.⁴⁶ First of all, while there are strong statements in the Gospel that assert Jesus' equality with God in the ultimate sense (1:1; 10:30; 20:28), "the Jews" in this text accuse Him of "making Himself" equal with God, something He would have no right to do if He were merely human, as the religious leaders perceive Him.⁴⁷

Thatcher's point is ironic in that John normally favors the reader of the Gospel with advance information (see 1:1-18, for example), but in the two Sabbath narratives, the characters in the story know it is Sabbath before the reader does.

⁴⁴McKay, 148.

⁴⁵It is interesting that the Gospel narrative gives full voice to Jesus' opponents, without immediately refuting their objections. Stephen Motyer, "Bridging the Gap: How Might the Fourth Gospel Help Us Cope with the Legacy of Christianity's Exclusive Claim over against Judaism?" in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, edited by Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 160.

⁴⁶Weiss, *JBL*, 317; Sturcke, 261.

⁴⁷From John's perspective, the Jewish leaders here were acting ignorantly regarding the deeper knowledge about Jesus that the Gospel provides. Motyer (154) notes, however, that they were "acting out of intense loyalty to the Law in opposing Jesus."

The falsity of the Sabbath breaking charge is addressed in chapter seven, where there is a clear reference back to the Sabbath healing at Bethesda (7:21-23).⁴⁸ In John 7, Jesus unequivocally denies being a Sabbath breaker. He justifies the Sabbath healing on the grounds that circumcision is not postponed on the Sabbath (7:23).⁴⁹ The argument is quite logical, from an ancient Jewish perspective. Circumcision on the Sabbath appears to be breaking the Sabbath law, but it is necessary in order to make a small part of a baby boy conform to God's will. Making an entire person conform to God's will would be even more important on the Sabbath.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, edited by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 368; Robert H. Mounce, "John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, revised edition, edited by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 10: 461; Sturcke, 223. Sturcke also notes (246) a connection between the two arguments in defense of Jesus' Sabbath activity. The only male babies who would be circumcised on the Sabbath (7:21-24) are those that were born the previous Sabbath (see 5:17– the work of God)!

⁴⁹Terian (57) cites Jewish discussions about this. McKay (148) notes that Jesus has exploited the inherent contradiction in allowing circumcision to over-ride the Sabbath law but not healing. Sharon Ringe points out that Jesus' response in this passage does not concern *whether* the Sabbath should be kept, but rather *how* it should be kept. See Sharon H. Ringe, "Holy, as the Lord Your God Commanded You: Sabbath in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 59 (number 1, January 2005), 17-19.

According to Carson, the point of this passage is that some laws over-ride other laws. In this case the opportunity to do good over-rides any detailed and legalistic observance of the Sabbath. Carson, (book chapter), 82; see Keener, 1:716.

⁵⁰Klink, 368-369; Wright, 101. In this argument Jesus is moving from the minor to the major. Circumcision was regarded as completing a man's perfection. Abraham was not regarded as perfect until he was circumcized. See Specht, 101; see also Bacchiocchi, *AUSS*, 18. The principle, as enunciated by Jesus in this text, was acknowledged by more than one ancient Jewish teacher, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 36, Glenn W. Barker and David A. Hubbard, general editors (Waco, TX: Words Books, 1987), 109-110; Talbert, 146.

So in Jesus' own mind He was honoring the Sabbath, not breaking it.⁵¹ He was disputing their inconsistent practice of the Law's principles (7:24).⁵²

In light of chapter seven, let's return to the assertion of John 5:18 (NIV) that Jesus "was breaking the Sabbath." The Greek translated "was breaking" (ἐλύειν) means to destroy something (as in the temple— 2:19) or to violate the law (7:23; 10:35, cf. Matt 5:19) in John, so the translation of the word is not at issue here.⁵³ We need to keep in mind, however, that the claim of Sabbath-breaking does not come from Jesus' mouth or the pen of the evangelist, rather it is an accusation from His opponents. And throughout the Gospel "the Jews" are portrayed as very unreliable witnesses,⁵⁴ so their opinion on this question should not be taken at face value.⁵⁵

⁵¹This is consistent with a point made by Weiss: the early Christian communities observed the Sabbath while engaging in debates over what was and was not permissible behavior on the Sabbath. See Herold Weiss, *JBL*, 313; idem, "The Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels," *JSNT* 38 (1990), 13-27. White, *The Desire of Ages*, 456.

Sturcke (241) argues that Jesus presumes in 7:21-24 the continuing validity of both circumcision and the Sabbath.

⁵²Keener, *John*, 1:714, 716; Sturcke, 243.

⁵³Having said that, Papaioannou (255-261) has recently made the case for a creative translation of *luô*, adopting an extended meaning of "to free or loose." He argues that Jesus was "freeing" the Sabbath from human casuistry. But regardless of what John means by *eluen*, here it is describing the motivations of the religious leaders not Jesus. It is expressing their belief that Jesus was constantly breaking the Sabbath and therefore needed to be punished. Costa covers the same ground but also draws a different conclusion than Papaioannou. Tony Costa, "The Sabbath and Its Relation to Christ and the Church in the New Covenant," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20/1 (Spring, 2016), 137.

⁵⁴According to Kerr, "The Jews" consistently misread the signs Jesus performs in the Fourth Gospel, therefore they are not reliable witnesses. Jim Kerr, "Sign as Symbol: The Sign Theme in the Fourth Gospel," *Stimulus* 23 (2, 2016): 33.

⁵⁵On the concepts of misunderstanding and characterization in the Gospel of John see R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

To argue that John 5:18 proves that Jesus annulled the Sabbath (as Schnackenburg does⁵⁶), therefore, is to hold the same position as Jesus' accusers, a charge Jesus explicitly refuses to admit in John 7:21-24.⁵⁷ Jesus also states later on (John 10:35) that Scripture cannot be "broken" (λυθῆναι). Why would we accept the characterization of His enemies rather than His own testimony regarding Himself?⁵⁸ Jesus' healing of the paralytic did not abolish the Sabbath, He was acting as God's agent to do what God does on the Sabbath, as noted in the previous verse.⁵⁹

Jesus' own words summarize His response to the accusation of Sabbath breaking in this chapter (John 5:16, 18). Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17, NIV).⁶⁰ This assertion brings us back to the central purpose

⁵⁶See above on page 4.

⁵⁷This point is forcefully made by Keener, 1:636. Jesus is not undermining the Sabbath, He is disputing the religious leaders' interpretation of it. See also Bacchiocchi, *AUSS*, 15.

⁵⁸The same Greek word is used in both John 5:18 and 10:35. Jesus is explicitly contradicting the assertion of 5:18.

⁵⁹Keener, *John*, 1: 645-646.

⁶⁰The Greek behind John 5:17 actually has "until now" instead of "always." Bacchiocchi argues that there is a significant difference between the two. Rather than a constant disregard of the Sabbath, "until now" suggests activity focused from a beginning point to a goal. In other words, the Sabbath work of Jesus and His Father is not so much a continuation of creation as it is working for the redemption of a fallen creation, from the first "to the final Sabbath." Samuele Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath in the New Testament, Biblical Perspectives*, vol. 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1985), 49; see also idem, *AUSS*, 11-13.

According to Weiss (*JBL*, 317-318), the phrase "until now" has an eschatological ring that highlights the saving activity of the Father in the work of the Son. The time will come when no more "work" can be done (John 9:4), but for now the Son's work must go on even on the Sabbath.

Whatever the merits of the above, the phrase does not imply a termination point so much as continuing, uninterrupted action on the part of the Father. Any inference that the Johannine

of the Gospel. In the Synoptics, Jesus' defense of His and His disciples' actions was the priority of human need (Mark 2:23-28, etc.). But such a defense would not serve the purpose of the Fourth Gospel. Jesus' defense in the Gospel of John highlights His oneness with the work of His Father (John 5:17). As Klink points out, Jesus speaking about God as His Father would have sounded strange to the Jews, but is completely at home in the text of John (1:18).⁶¹ His Sabbath work involves participation in God's ongoing work to sustain and redeem His creation.⁶² And that is the very point of John 5:19-30, which explains verses 17-18. Jesus' divine work is directly authorized by His Father.⁶³

community had given up the Sabbath on the basis of this phrase is speculative at best. See Sturcke, 248-251.

⁶¹Klink, 275.

⁶²Klink, 276; Papaioannou, 247. The monologue in 5:19-30 makes it clear what Jesus had in mind by "works," in the Gospel's terms it was "giving life" and "judging." See Sturcke, 220.

Bacchiocchi (*AUSS*, 13-14) draws a distinction between the sustaining and redeeming work of Jesus and the Father. He argues that in the Gospel of John the "works of God" are repeatedly and explicitly identified with the saving mission of Christ (John 4:34; 6:29; 10:37-38). This is a point worth noting. I am not sure, however, that 5:17 is drawing that fine a distinction, so I have chosen to use both "sustain" and "redeem" with reference to this text.

Weiss points out that in Hebrews, God is portrayed as being at rest since creation, and people in Old Testament times failed to enter that rest, even though they superficially kept the Sabbath. Ironically in John the same point is made in the opposite way. God is always doing the right thing on the Sabbath and Jesus does so as well, inviting his follows to a true grasp of the Sabbath. In a sense, the eschatological quality of the Sabbath has been brought into the Jesus community. Weiss, *JBL*, 318-319.

⁶³By claiming equality with God Jesus was not claiming independence from God. Rather, in John 5:19-20 Jesus defends Himself by clarifying two things: 1) The Son in no way acts independently of His Father (John 5:19-21, 30), and 2) He has both natural right (5:26) and divine authorization (5:22-23, 26-27) to act as God acts in both the giving of life (5:21, 25) and judgment (5: 22, 27-29). He is not defying God's will, He is carrying it out. They are not honoring the God of Israel when they dishonor Him (John 5:23).

If Jesus had been attempting to abolish the Sabbath in John 5:17-18, He would not have appealed to Moses and the Law as part of His defense later on (John 5:39, 45-47). His dispute

Behind the assertion of 5:17 lay a long history of Jewish debate about the relation of God to the Sabbath.⁶⁴ It was clear to Jews of the time that God could not stop working on Sabbath or life as we know it would cease.⁶⁵ While various ancient Jewish thinkers justified God's actions in different ways,⁶⁶ there was a general consensus that God is able to work on the Sabbath without in any way breaking the Sabbath.⁶⁷

Jesus' assertion that God is always at work, therefore, would have gone over well with his accusers if He had left it at that. It could have been understood that He was working on the Sabbath in order to be obedient to God, who gives life on the Sabbath.⁶⁸ But Jesus' claim that He had the same right as God to work on Sabbath did not go over well.⁶⁹ "The Jews" clearly understood Him to be challenging the distinction between the divine and the human, claiming prerogatives that belonged to God alone.⁷⁰ To the reader of the Gospel, Jesus' claim made

with the Jews is not about the validity of the Sabbath, but about how the Sabbath ought to be kept and His authority to issue such a ruling.

⁶⁴They understood God to give life and execute judgment on the Sabbath. C. Marvin Pate, *The Writings of John: A Survey of the Gospel, Epistles and Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 86. See also Jo-Ann A. Brant, *John*, Paideia Commentaries on the Bible, edited by Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 105; Mounce, 424.

⁶⁵In a side note, Ellen White argues that the demands upon God are even greater on the Sabbath day than on other days of the week. See *The Desire of Ages*, 207.

⁶⁶Asiedu-Pepurah, 77 and notes; Brown, 1: 216-217; Weiss, *JBL*, 315.

⁶⁷Terian, 55-56. Philo said that while God rested on the Sabbath day it only means that His Sabbath activity required no labor. See Brown, 1:217; Keener, *John*, 1:646; Loader, 331, 449; Talbert, 123-124.

⁶⁸Brant, 137.

⁶⁹Sturcke, 236.

⁷⁰Brown, 1: 217; Mounce, 424; Paulien, *John*, 119; Tonstad, 190.

perfect sense in light of the Prologue. The religious leaders, on the other hand, were enraged that He might consider Himself equal with God.⁷¹

So the introduction of the Sabbath in John 5 served to highlight the divine identity of Jesus.⁷² If He was truly the Messiah, the Son of God, then He did not really break the Sabbath. Instead, He did what God always does on the Sabbath, sustain and rescue His creation.⁷³ Jesus was not usurping the power and authority of God, He was doing what the Logos had done from the beginning (John 1:1-3).⁷⁴ As the Creator, He was the author of the Sabbath and was therefore Lord of how to keep it (cf. Matt 12:8; Mark 2:28; Luke 6:5). Jesus and His Father are one in purpose. In His actions on the Sabbath, Jesus was showing what God (the Father) is like (John 1:18; 14:9), by countering the accusations of Satan (John 8:44).⁷⁵

With Jesus' statement in 5:17, therefore, the story in John is no longer centered on the Sabbath, but on the identity of Jesus,⁷⁶ on His claim to a special relationship with God, His

⁷¹Tom Thatcher, "The Passion of Jesus and the Gospel of John: Progress and Prospects," *John, Jesus and History, Volume 3: Glimpses of Jesus Through the Johannine Lens*, edited by Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 144. In a way, I sympathize with the religious leaders in John 5. Although Jesus' words in John 5:17 and 19-30 are powerful and eloquent, they would ring false in the mouth of every other human being who ever lived. See Paulien, *John*, 122. Without the knowledge gained from the Prologue, even readers of the Gospel would probably be stumped by Jesus' claims at this point.

⁷²McKay, 149; Ringe, 22; Sturcke, 220.

⁷³Sturcke, 244-245.

⁷⁴Bryan, 20-21. For John, Jesus is not making Himself God, God is making Himself Jesus! See Craig S. Keener, "We Beheld His Glory! (John 1:14)" in *John, Jesus and History, Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, edited by Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 24, note 39.

⁷⁵Tonstad, 191-196.

⁷⁶Carson, (book chapter), 81-82.

Father.⁷⁷ The central point of this chapter is not the Sabbath nor the healing of the paralyzed man, it is John's ongoing mission to convince the reader that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, the One who reveals the Father (John 1:18; 20:30-31).⁷⁸ *To make the ongoing validity of the Sabbath the point of contention in the chapter is to miss the point.*

Conclusion

In the previous section we have reviewed the evidence regarding the purpose of the Sabbath healing at Bethesda in the larger context of the Gospel. Was the purpose of including John 5:17-18 in the Gospel to show that the Sabbath is abolished or to underline the identity of Jesus as the one who came to reveal what God is like? The evidence we have examined confirms that it was not John's intention in this chapter to signal Christians to stop observing the Sabbath. This is evident from four things. 1) While the statement in 5:18 is made by the narrator, it is describing the view of Jesus' religious opponents, not that of Jesus or John. 2) Throughout the Gospel "the Jews" are unreliable witnesses. 3) Jesus Himself denies in John that He broke the Sabbath (John 7:23). 4) Jesus' assertion of His divine nature is appropriate to reality as understood in the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-18; 5:19-30).

It was not the purpose of John 5 to demonstrate that Jesus broke the Sabbath and thereby abolished it for His followers. Healing the man by the Pool of Bethesda was performed by the same God who created the Sabbath (John 1:1-3; Gen 2:1-4). If the Sabbath was valid throughout

⁷⁷Specht, 100.

⁷⁸See Robert J. Myles, "Opiate of Christ; or, John's Gospel and the Spectre of Class," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 7 (3, 2016): 270; Weiss, *JBL*, 311.

OT times, it was certainly still valid at the time when John was written. The Sabbath is not introduced in John 5 to assess whether it has ongoing validity, but as the trigger point of a controversy which enabled Jesus to more clearly outline His divine nature and activity.⁷⁹

Anyone who looks for justification of a casual observance of the fourth commandment will not find it here. The Sabbath is written into the order of the universe, and Jesus does not challenge or change that order.⁸⁰

The Sabbath Healing Outside the Temple (John 9)

The Preceding Context

The context of John 9 clearly includes chapter five.⁸¹ In both narratives water plays a central role (John 5:2, 7; 9:7), Jesus also takes the initiative to heal on the Sabbath (5:9; 9:14) and the religious leaders accuse Jesus of violating the Sabbath (5:10; 9:16). In both narratives the healed person doesn't know where or who Jesus is (5:13; 9:12). Sin is related in some way to each man's suffering (5:14; 9:3) and Jesus ends up seeking each man out and inviting belief (5:14; 9:35). Both narratives concern the identity of Jesus. And in both narratives, Jesus justifies His actions with a lengthy speech in defense.⁸² The two passages, therefore, need to be looked at together, as we are doing here.⁸³

⁷⁹McKay, 149.

⁸⁰Karen Pidcock-Lester, "John 5:1-9," *Interpretation* 59 (number 1, January 2005), 62.

⁸¹Keener, *John*, 1:639-640.

⁸²The analogy of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-21) is linked to the narrative of chapter nine and forms the major part of Jesus' defense of His identity in the narrative.

⁸³Sturcke (231) notes some contrasts between chapters five and nine as well as the similarities.

The theme of conflict between Jesus and His religious contemporaries is continued in chapter six. Jesus returns to Galilee (John 6) and engages in a lengthy debate with “the crowd” (John 6:24) and “the Jews” (6:41, 52) over his Bread of Life statements. The sense of conflict is clear, but there is no mention of the Sabbath in this chapter.

At the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, the stage moves back to Jerusalem (John 7:1-14), where Jesus engages His opponents in the temple (7:14 - 8:59). The wording of John 8:59 and 9:1 makes it clear that the story of John 9 is an extension of the Feast of Tabernacles narrative of John 7 and 8.⁸⁴ The narrative of chapter nine is also closely linked to the Good Shepherd passage in the next chapter, creating a continuous narrative (9:1 - 10:21).⁸⁵ The combined narrative is a unity in which Jesus, the Light of the world (8:12; 9:5), brings judgment on the religious leaders

⁸⁴The scene occurs as Jesus is walking away from the temple after the conflict episodes of John 7 and 8. See Asiedu-Peprah, 117; Keener, *John*, 1:776-777; Kok, 42.

⁸⁵The close linkage between John 9:1-41 and 10:1-21 is evident in the original language. The chapter is not sharply divided from what precedes, but begins with “I tell you the truth” (Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν). Nowhere else in the Gospel does Jesus use this expression at the beginning of a discourse, it always comes as a point of emphasis in the midst of a discourse or a discussion (for example, 6:26, 32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58). Furthermore, the reference to opening the eyes of the blind in John 10:21 shows that the events of chapter nine are still squarely in view.

In chapter ten Jesus builds on the story of His healing of the blind man and His rescuing of him from the spiritual abuse of the religious leaders (9:1-41). The response of the healed blind man to Jesus is reflected in 10:4; he was a sheep that recognized the voice of the Shepherd and followed Him. In John 10 Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep, even the sheep that have been cast out of the sheepfold. See Paulien, *John*, 169-170; see also Beasley-Murray, 167; Keener, 1:775; Sturcke, 227; Talbert, 164.

John 7:1 through 10:21 forms a literary unit centered on the Feast of Tabernacles. Kim (2010): 310-312; Paulien, *John*, 169-170.

(particularly in 9:39 - 10:21) who resist the shining of His light on the hearts and lives of those who had once served the system.

The debate over Jesus' identity escalates throughout John 7 and 8 until Jesus' opponents take up stones to kill Him (8:59).⁸⁶ This opposition and two other themes of chapters seven and eight, in particular, set the stage for the Sabbath controversy in John 9.⁸⁷ In John 7:37-39 Jesus applies the metaphor of water to Himself. What the Feast of Tabernacles promised to the worshiper is provided by Jesus. In John 8:12, Jesus also declares Himself to be the Light of the World. Just as the pillar of fire provided light in the wilderness, Jesus provides spiritual light to those who follow Him.

These three themes, water, light and resistance to Jesus, are taken up again in chapter nine. By incorporating the Pool of Siloam into the miracle (John 9:7), Jesus transformed the literal elements of Jewish worship (including the water procession of the Feast of Tabernacles) into spiritual realities. Since God Himself is associated with the healing of the blind in Psalm 146:8,⁸⁸ the healing of the blind man is a living illustration of Jesus' role as Light of the World (9:5). While the conflict motif of John 5 is continued in chapters six through eight, the Sabbath is not at the center of that conflict, except for the brief recollection of John 5 in John 7:22-23. It is only in chapter nine that the author of the gospel takes up the Sabbath once more as a focal point in the conflict over Jesus' identity.

⁸⁶Kim (2010): 313.

⁸⁷John 9 is also based on the Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated the miraculous provision of water in the desert and also the pillar of fire and cloud during the Exodus.

⁸⁸Kim (2010): 316.

Exegesis of John 9

As mentioned earlier, in John 9 Jesus acts out in real life what He meant when He said, “I am the Light of the world” (8:12; 9:5).⁸⁹ In healing the man born blind, Jesus first of all gives him access to literal light; the man could now see (9:7, 11, 15). At the end of the chapter Jesus moves beyond the miracle of physical sight and gives to the man his spiritual sight (9:35-39). Jesus’ power to give physical sight demonstrated His ability and His authority to give spiritual understanding and spiritual life.

Chapter nine opens with a brief discussion between Jesus and His disciples regarding who is to blame for the blindness of a man they are walking by (9:1-5).⁹⁰ Jesus then anoints the man’s eyes with mud and sends him off to the Pool of Siloam to wash the mud off (9:6-7).⁹¹ At this point in the narrative, the Sabbath has not yet been mentioned, but the method of healing prepares the way for the Sabbath controversy that follows.

There seem to be several breaches of the oral law regarding the Sabbath in this action of Jesus.⁹² First of all, mixing was forbidden on the Sabbath.⁹³ Second, kneading is one of 39

⁸⁹Terian (57) notes that creation week began with the creation of light and ended with the creation of the Sabbath. So John 9 ties these two themes together in a way that was natural to the Jewish mind of the first century. See also Brown, 1: 379; Keener, *John*, 1:779; Talbert, 158.

⁹⁰In early Judaism blindness and other maladies were connected to sin. See Klink, 436-437; Kok, 49; Pate 114.

⁹¹A probable allusion to the creation story in Genesis 2: Daniel Frayer-Griggs, “Spittle, Clay, and Creation in John 9:6 and Some Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (3, 2013): 659-670.

⁹²Beasley-Murray, 156-157; Brown, 1: 373; Carson, (book chapter), 82; Specht, 101; Sturcke, 230. These scholars assume that the strictures in the *Mishnah* (circa 200 A.D.) accurately reflect practice in Jesus’ day.

⁹³*m. Shabbath* 24:3. See Danby, 120-121.

prohibited types of work.⁹⁴ Third, the smearing of mud on the man's eyes may have transgressed the stricture against anointing on the Sabbath.⁹⁵ The healing itself could also have been considered unlawful on the Sabbath, as the man's blindness from birth was hardly a health-care emergency.⁹⁶ So while Jesus does not challenge any written precept of the Mosaic law, His actions are in conflict with a number of strictures in the oral tradition.⁹⁷

As the healed man is brought to the Pharisees for questioning (9:13), the narrative introduces the Sabbath into the discussion. Since the day of the healing was a Sabbath (14), Jesus' actions of making mud and healing the man become problematic for His identity.⁹⁸ The fact that it was Sabbath is not critical to the fact of the man's healing, but it is critical to the Pharisees' condemnation of that healing.⁹⁹

The Pharisees conclude from this new healing on the Sabbath that they have further evidence that Jesus' identity claims are false (9:16).¹⁰⁰ They level once again the same basic

⁹⁴*m. Shabbath* 7:2. See Danby, 106. See also Asiedu-Peprah, 118; Klink, 441-442; Pate 115-116.

⁹⁵*m. Shabbath* 14:4. See Danby, 113.

⁹⁶As was also the case with the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years (John 5:2-5).

⁹⁷Carson, (book chapter), 84. According to Brown (1: 210): "That Jesus violated the rules of the scribes for the observance of the Sabbath is one of the most certain of all the historical facts about his ministry." Of these violations of the oral law, the making of mud seems to have been the most central in the mind of the Gospel's author (John 9:11, 14, 15). See Tonstad, 186.

⁹⁸Tonstad, 186.

⁹⁹Keener, *John*, 1:784; Kok, 55. According to Deut 13:1-5, the prophet who does mighty works yet does or teaches things contrary to the law of God is a false prophet.

¹⁰⁰According to Ellen White, the Pharisees revealed here their ignorance that Jesus was the one who had made the Sabbath and therefore knew all of its obligations. *The Desire of Ages*, 472. The prologue is once more decisive for readers of the Gospel of John.

accusations expressed in John 5:18: Jesus does not keep the Sabbath, therefore He is not from God. But this time they are divided in their sentiment.¹⁰¹ Some among them argue that the greatness of the sign militates against a sinful origin (9:16). So the identity of Jesus remains at the core of the issue here. If Jesus was who He claimed to be, He was not breaking the Sabbath in John 9. He was demonstrating His identity as the One who was Lord of the Sabbath and therefore knew how it ought to be kept.

The clarity of the healed man's picture of Jesus grows and grows throughout the narrative. He immediately testifies that Jesus must be a prophet (9:17, cf. 4:19). Then he waxes bolder and bolder in sarcastic defiance of the religious leaders who oppose Jesus (9:27, 30-33). His part in the narrative concludes with a full and complete expression of commitment to Jesus (38). Some scholars have suggested that the healed blind man illustrates the progression from unbelief to full discipleship.¹⁰²

In contrast, the religious leaders' opposition grows in intensity and irrationality as the narrative moves on. In their final statement the religious leaders even let on that they knew that the healing was genuine (34). Their opposition to Jesus was not based on reasoned argument, but on blind hatred (39-41).¹⁰³ But at that very stage, Jesus as the Good Shepherd steps in (John 9:35-38 - 10:21) and cares for the outcast man.

¹⁰¹Keener, *John*, 1:787.

¹⁰²The scholarly debate on this is summarized in B. Vincent Muderhwa, "The blind man of John 9 as a paradigmatic figure of the disciple in the Fourth Gospel," *HTS Theologesie Studies/HTS Theological Studies* 68 (1, 2012), Art. #1008, 10 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1008>.

¹⁰³Douglas K. Clark, "Signs in Wisdom and John," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983): 208.

A crucial point in the narrative, for our purpose, is the response of the religious leaders to the man's question, "Do you also want to become His disciples (9:27, ESV)?" In response, they assert that they are disciples of Moses (9:28). Moses is the one they trust to speak for God, not Jesus (9:29).¹⁰⁴ The basis for this contrast is their understanding of the Sabbath. The disciples of Moses claim to exhibit their discipleship by scrupulously observing the Sabbath laws given by Moses.

The reader of the Gospel, however, already knows that the opposition between Jesus and Moses, between the gospel and the law, is a false dichotomy. First, as the messianic Son of God, who was with the Father from the beginning and who created everything that was made (1:3), Jesus enjoys the same prerogatives as the Father. He is not the adversary of Moses, but the One who elaborates and expands on the Law (1:17). In the Old Testament, the Sabbath celebrated both creation (Exod 20:8-11) and re-creation (Deut 5:12-15). So for Jesus to do works of healing on the Sabbath day is to participate in God's continuing work of sustaining His creation (John 5:17, 19-30). If Jesus is who He claims to be, He has not broken the Sabbath, He has rather affirmed its celebration of creation in His work of re-creation (5:26-27).

It is on this point that the fourth Sabbath text in the Gospel of John has relevance. In John 19:31, "the Jews" show more concern for the ritual observance of the Sabbath than they do for the Lord of the Sabbath.¹⁰⁵ They are acting as disciples of Moses, yet they ironically demonstrate

¹⁰⁴Asiedu-Peprah (141) notes that the particle $\delta\epsilon$ is used in these verses to establish a contrast between "the Jews" and the man, on the one hand, and between Moses and Jesus, on the other.

¹⁰⁵ Hengel sees in John 19:28-31 an allusion to Genesis 2:1-2. If valid, the allusion would imply that Jesus' "rested" in the tomb on the Sabbath after His finished work of redemption just as God rested on the Sabbath after His finished work of creation. Martin Hengel, "Die

that Jesus has obeyed Moses at a far deeper level than they comprehend (19:36; cf. Exod 12:46; Num 9:12). The cause of this Sabbath controversy in John 9, therefore, was not the action of Jesus, but the Pharisees' lack of understanding of the words God spoke through Moses (5:45-47).¹⁰⁶

The healed man underscores this very point in 9:30-33. His healing is without precedent "since the world began" (9:32). This allusion to creation recalls to the reader's mind the role of the Logos in creation (1:3) and Jesus' earlier claim to be exercising God's sustaining power in the current situation (John 5:17, 19-30). In a sense, by giving the man something he was born without, Jesus was bringing the work of creation to its perfect completion (see John 5:36).¹⁰⁷ The healed man affirms this conclusion by his words and actions in John 9:38.¹⁰⁸

The narrative of John 9, therefore, invalidates the judgments of "the Jews" with regard to Jesus. First, the fact that God's power is at work in Him means that he cannot be a sinner (cf. 9:16, 24), in other words, a Sabbath breaker. Second, the unprecedented nature of the healing

Schriftauslegung des 4. Evangeliums auf dem Hintergrund der urchristlichen Exegese," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 4 (1989): 284-285.

¹⁰⁶In this paragraph I am considerably indebted to Asiedu-Peprah, 141-142.

¹⁰⁷Wright, 138-139. Droge (128) makes the fascinating observation that in John 1:5 the presence of darkness ("the light shines in the darkness") indicates that the full sabbath rest of creation (as stated in Gen 2:1-3) has yet to be achieved. From the standpoint of John, the original creation remains incomplete and unfinished at the time when Jesus comes. Thus, the work of Jesus in the Gospel is designed as a completion of the original work of creation.

Droge (see 133-134) goes on to enumerate the various places where Jesus speaks of His mission as "to finish his (the Father's) work" (John 4:32, 34, cf. Gen 2:2). He speaks of "the works that the Father has given me to finish" (5:36), glorifying God by "finishing the work" (17:4-5), and pronouncing that "it is finished" (19:28, 30).

¹⁰⁸This paragraph is indebted to Asiedu-Peprah, 145.

indicates there must be a special relationship between Jesus and the God of creation Himself.

Jesus' Sabbath healings, therefore, are not violations of the Sabbath, they are testimonies to the unique identity of Jesus, who does the work of the Father on this earth.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

As many scholars and other chapters in this book make clear, the authors of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts assume that the Sabbath was honored by Jesus and His disciples.¹¹⁰ The same would appear to be the case in the Gospel of John. But the purpose of the Sabbath texts in John is not to address whether the Sabbath should be kept by Christians, it is to highlight the identity of Jesus.¹¹¹ He is the Life-giver (John 20:30-31), the One apart from whom nothing was made (1:3), the one who is equal with the Father (10:30), and who came to reveal what the Father is like (1:1-18; 14:9).¹¹² He is within His rights to work on the Sabbath as His Father works (5:17, 19-30). It would be taking the evidence too far, therefore, to say that the author, or the Jesus he

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 145-146.

¹¹⁰One non-Adventist scholar who makes this point unequivocally is Ringe, 17-19. See also the arguments and literature cited in Weiss, *JBL*, 313-314; and idem, *JSNT*, 13-27.

¹¹¹Tonstad, 182, 185-189. This is almost universally acknowledged by Johannine scholars, even those who attempt to make John 5:17-18 a negation of the Sabbath for Christians. "The Gospel of John fundamentally contains but a single theme: the Person of Jesus." Bultmann, 5. Bultmann then tellingly makes the following admission: "The stories of healings on the Sabbath, for example (chs 5 and 9) do not, as in the Synoptics, demonstrate the Christian understanding of the Sabbath command, but serve as occasions for discussions about the person of the miracle worker." Ibid. So there is an internal contradiction in how Bultmann handles these passages.

See also Ruldolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Volume One, Introduction and Commentary on chapters 1-4*, translated by Kevin Smythe, Herder's Theological Commentary on the New Testament (NY: Herder and Herder, 1968), 154-156; Sturcke, 204, 227, 264.

¹¹²Tonstad, 183.

portrays, is intentionally re-affirming the validity of Sabbath observance for the readers of the Gospel.¹¹³

What is clear, however, is that the Sabbath texts in the Gospel of John do not support the idea that the Sabbath has been abolished for Christians. Even D. A. Carson, who organized and edited the most thorough case for a shift from Sabbath to Sunday,¹¹⁴ agrees that John 5:17-18 does not make that case. “John, by taking the discussion into Christological and eschatological realms, does not deal explicitly with the question of whether or not Christians are to observe the weekly Sabbath.”¹¹⁵ This conclusion is affirmed by Geza Vermes, who wrote, “If, as is often claimed, the evangelists aimed at inculcating. . . Christian doctrine such as the annulment of the Sabbath legislation. . . they did a pitiful job which falls short of proving their alleged thesis.”¹¹⁶ Jesus did not reject the Sabbath, He simply kept it in a way that was different from most of His contemporaries.¹¹⁷

While Jesus clearly rejected the rabbinical rules for Sabbath keeping, He honored the deeper principles implied within the Sabbath command He Himself had established at creation.

¹¹³Ibid.; Wright, 138-139. Sturcke, nevertheless, feels that while the Johannine community acted in ways the Jews interpreted as Sabbath breaking, they themselves understood their behavior as in harmony with the Sabbath as interpreted by Jesus. See Karina Martin Hogan, review of Henry Sturcke, *Encountering the Rest of God: How Jesus Came to Personify the Sabbath*, TZV Dissertationen (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006), 784.

¹¹⁴D. A. Carson, editor, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, Academie Books Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982).

¹¹⁵Carson, (book chapter), 82.

¹¹⁶Quoted in Keener, *John*, 1: 643.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

In His relation to the Sabbath, He was underscoring His role as the One who was sent to reveal the character of the Father. A legalistic approach to the Sabbath is grounded in a severe picture of God. Jesus' approach to Sabbath-keeping was instead grounded in the character of the God of creation (Exod 20:8-11) and the Exodus (Deut 5:12-15). Jesus was One with the Father, who gives freedom and creativity to the creatures He made in His own image, who rescues them from bondage, and authorized Jesus to heal and bless on the Sabbath.