

John 5:1-18

"Yeshua Healing a Man on the Sabbath"

"After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Yeshua went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep *gate* a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, *waiting for the moving of the waters*; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted. A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Yeshua saw him lying *there*, and knew that he had already been a long time *in that condition*, He said to him, 'Do you wish to get well?' The sick man answered Him, 'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.' Yeshua said to him, 'Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.' Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and *began* to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, 'It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.' But he answered them, 'He who made me well was the one who said to me, "Pick up your pallet and walk."'" They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Pick up *your pallet* and walk"?' But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Yeshua had slipped away while there was a crowd in *that place*. Afterward Yeshua found him in the temple and said to him, 'Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.' The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Yeshua who had made him well. For this reason the Jews were persecuting Yeshua, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.' For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God."

John 5:1-18 records an important scene of Yeshua the Messiah taking the initiative to heal an invalid at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. While important questions are necessarily posed as to this individual's personal disposition (5:5), regarding how he became infirm and why he was in this condition for so long (5:14), our attention is necessarily directed toward his healing taking place on the Sabbath (5:9b-10). Was it Yeshua's intention, in healing this man on the Sabbath, to violate the Sabbath in some way? How are we to gauge the reaction of the religious leaders (5:16) and the Messiah's response to them (5:17-18)?

When many of today's Christian Bible readers encounter the statement, "He...was breaking the Sabbath" (5:18), it is concluded that not only did Yeshua violate Sabbath instructions in the Law of Moses and Old Testament, but that this signals an intention for the seventh-day Sabbath to be abrogated subsequent to His resurrection, for sure. However, examiners John 5:1-18 have to be more cautious in drawing this conclusion, as they consider background in Second Temple Judaism and its traditions of Sabbath application, some of the terminology employed, and they weigh what the major issue in view actually is.

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5:1 As this record begins, it is narrated, "Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews" (NIV), which the TNIV changed to "one of the Jewish festivals," the CJB having "a Judean festival," and the TLV "a Jewish feast."¹ What festival was being observed? With Yeshua present in Jerusalem, the major options would likely be the pilgrimage feasts of Passover, *Shavuot*/Pentecost, or *Sukkot*/Tabernacles. Commentators and examiners have expressed opinions in favor of one of these, or even others. But the major focus of what is going on is a healing on the weekly Sabbath or *Shabbat* (v. 18).

5:2 Readers of multiple English versions can wonder where this scene is actually taking place, as they will witness the location labeled as: "Bethesda" (NASU), "Bethzatha" (RSV, TLV), "Bethsaida" (Common English Bible), or even "Beit-Zata" (CJB). There is also no agreement on whether *Hebraisti* (Ἑβραϊστὶ) is to represent "Hebrew" (NASU, RSV/NRSV) or "Aramaic" (NIV, ESV, CJB, TLV), although the term is obviously Semitic. Beyond this, does the name of this pool of water mean anything significant? And, is there anything significant about its location being "by the sheep gate...having five porticoes"?

Among Greek lexicons, *Thayer* details a view that the transliteration *Bēthzatha* (Βηθζαθά) originates "perhaps from Chaldean ܒܝܬ ܙܝܬܐ [*beit za'ta*], house of olives; not, as some suppose, ܒܝܬ ܚܕܐܬܐ [*beit chadata*], house of newness...since it cannot be shown that the Hebrew letter chet ܫ [*ch, ḥ*] is ever represented by the Greek zeta ζ [*z*]."² Weighing some of the different options between either Bethesda or Bethzatha, is the *EDB* entry:

"Archaeological excavations beside the present church of St. Anne just N of the Temple Mount have partially uncovered the remains of a large double pool dating to pre-Christian times which is almost certainly that mentioned in John 5, but the exact location of the 'five porticoes' is still debated. Therapeutic traditions continued at this site in the 2nd century and beyond through a shrine dedicated to the Roman healing-god Asclepius.

"Most English Bibles read Bethesda, but there are significant variations in the Greek texts of John 5:2. Some erroneously read Bethsaida (cf. John 1:44). Others have Bethzatha (Aram. 'place of olives'), which some scholars argue was the original reading (NRSV, UBS⁴), but this is probably just a variant of Bezestha, the newest section of Jerusalem in the 1st century (Josephus *BJ* 2.15.5 [328]; 5.5.2 [148-52]). Most NT manuscripts read Bethesda, meaning either 'house of mercy' (Aram. *bēt ḥesdā'*) or 'place of flowing water' (Aram. *bēt 'esdā'*). The latter interpretation is supported by the 1st-century Copper scroll from Qumran, in which *bet 'esdatayim* (a dual form) apparently refers to a double pool near the Jerusalem temple (3Q15 11:12). Thus, the textual confusion may stem from differing Greek transliterations of similar Aramaic names, Beth-esda referring to the pool itself and Beth-zatha to its location."³

5:3-4 As appears in the RSV for v. 3a (among other versions, i.e., NIV, NRSV/ESV), it is stated, "In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed." There is an extended reading which appears for vs. 3b-4, which canonically is a part of the text, and

¹ Grk. *heortē tōn Ioudaiōn* (ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων); Heb. equiv. *chag l'Yehudim* (חַג לְיְהוּדִים; Delitzsch).

² *Thayer*, 101.

³ Felix Just, S.J., "Bethesda," in *EDB*, 171.

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does explain why there were many sickly people at the Pool of Bethesda.⁴ The extended reading is not often believed to be authentic to the Fourth Gospel, so it is usually included in various footnotes to major versions. It is included in *italics* or brackets [] in various editions of the NASU (quoted above) and the HCSB quoted below:

"[W]aiting for the moving of the water, because an angel would go down into the pool from time to time and stir up the water. Then the first one who got in after the water was stirred up recovered from whatever ailment he had" (vs. 3b-4, HCSB).

We should have little problem with the view that an angel would be sent from God to stir up the water, water which presumably had some kind of healing properties.

5:5-6 At the Pool of Bethesda, "One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years" (v. 5, NRSV). This condition is *astheneia* (ἀσθένεια), "want of strength, weakness, feebleness, sickness" (LS).⁵ Some have thought, per the statement of Deuteronomy 2:14, "Now the time that it took for us to come from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed over the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until all the generation of the men of war perished from within the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them," that the invalid being thirty-eight years of age is to somehow symbolize or represent the struggles throughout past Israelite and then-present Jewish history. More true to the man being thirty-eight years old, would be how given the shorter lifespans of people in the ancient world, that this individual was sickly throughout most of his life—and that this had taken a significant, personal toll on him. And so, "Seeing him lying there and knowing he had been that way a long time, Yeshua said to him, 'Do you want to get well?'" (v. 6, TLV).

5:7-8 The narration details, "'I can't, sir,' the sick man said, 'for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me'" (v. 7, NLT). The response of this individual to the Messiah is sometimes thought to be similar to that of Nicodemus (3:3-4). Yeshua directs him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (v. 8, NRSV). A *krabbatos* (κράβαττος) is basically a "**mattress, pallet, the poor man's bed**" (BDAG).⁶ D.A. Carson describes more fully what picking up this mat or pallet would have signaled per the healing:

"The 'mat', normally made of straw, was light enough to be rolled up and easily carried on the shoulder of a well person...Probably the command was particularly suited to healed paralytics: the healed individual was not staggering off in ambiguous health, but leaving with the bodily strength necessary to carry his mat!"⁷

5:9 A miracle has happened! "Instantly the man got well, picked up his mat, and started to walk" (v. 9a, HCSB). Then the time of the miracle is identified: "Now that day was *Shabbat*" (v. 9b, CJB). It is to be recognized that within the mainstream Jewish Sabbath *halachah*, much of which would be later detailed in the Talmud, that helping to heal someone of an ailment was not prohibited. But, one does see the opinion expressed that while short term, acute conditions, could be treated on *Shabbat*—particularly those

⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 209; Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), pp 272-273.

⁵ LS, 123.

⁶ BDAG, 563.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp 243-244.

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which were life-threatening—more long-term illnesses or handicaps could wait. As it is summarized,

“Further did R. Matia b. Harash say, ‘He who has a pain in his throat —they drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath:’ R. Yohanan suffered from scurvy. He went to a certain matron. She made him something on Thursday and on Friday. He said to her, ‘So what should I do on the Sabbath?’ She said to him, ‘You won’t need it any more’” (b.Yoma 84b).⁸

More to the condition of the man who was healed by Yeshua, Merrill C. Tenney is among those who issues the thought, “The paralysis of body was accompanied by a partial paralysis of will. Jesus’ selection of this man from the large number of invalids at the pool indicated His interest in restoring those who have been reduced to utter helplessness both in body and spirit.”⁹ While physically infirm, the mental or psychological effects of his infirmity, for thirty-eight years (v. 6), had to have played some role in Yeshua’s healing.

5:10 A variety of factors play into properly evaluating what takes place, as the healed man picks up his mat, and leaves the Pool of Bethesda. As it appears in the rather popular ESV, “So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, ‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.’”

One thing which should immediately jump out at us, is how John is using the terminology *hoi Ioudaioi* (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι).¹⁰ Certainly, Yeshua, the man healed, and these antagonists introduced are **all Jews**. And, “the Jews” is the most frequent rendering for *hoi Ioudaioi* that will be encountered in English Bibles (the Kingdom New Testament has the more geographical, “the Judaeans”), which means some specificity has to be in mind, as being the authorial intent. F.F. Bruce asserts, “Here, as regularly in the Gospel of John, it is important to mark who exactly ‘the Jews’ in question are: in this context they are members of the religious establishment in Jerusalem.”¹¹ Gail R. O’Day similarly recognizes,

“The use of the phrase ‘the Jews’ (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι *hoi Ioudaioi*) in this passage is a banner example of the distinctive Johannine usage of this term. It cannot refer to the Jewish people in general, since the man Jesus heals is certainly a Jew himself. Therefore, it refers to the Jewish authorities who oppose Jesus.”¹²

Among Christian versions, the Common English Bible actually has “The Jewish leaders” for v. 10; a Messianic version such as the TLV has “Judean leaders.”

A little more important, to be sure, is whether Torah and/or Tanach Sabbath regulations have actually been violated or broken by Yeshua the Messiah, with the claim of the Jewish religious leaders being accurate. Laypersons encountering the statement in

⁸ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

⁹ Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 105; against: Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 147 who urges against “psychologizing.”

¹⁰ Heb. equiv. *haYehudim* (הַיְהוּדִים; Delitzsch).

¹¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 125.

¹² Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:579.

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their English Bibles, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat" (NIV), might automatically assume that some commandment(s) of the Old Testament have been transgressed. And indeed, there are passages, such as Numbers 15:32-35 and Jeremiah 17:21 (previously addressed), which could be considered. There are even a few commentators, perhaps not intentionally, who do come close to implying that, at least some Tanach precedents, have been ruptured. Tenney draws the conclusion,

"The law was 'holy and righteous and good' (Rom. 7:12), and its requirement of the observance of the Sabbath was intended to provide men with a pause in the week's exhausting toil. When the regulation became a barrier to the performance of that which was inherently right, revision was necessary."¹³

Other commentators actually do see an intention of Yeshua, and/or the author of John, annulling the seventh-day Sabbath in this scene. Ben Witherington III is reflective of this standpoint, in his word,

"From the Johannine perspective...Jesus is the world's source of rest, and thus he fulfills and so makes obsolescent Jewish Sabbath regulations...Jesus [replaces] the institutions of Judaism with something he has to offer that is superior and more lasting."¹⁴

More commentators than not, however, do not draw the conclusion that an explicit violation of Torah Sabbath commandments has been committed by Yeshua the Messiah. Instead, the extra-Biblical regulations seen in the Mishnah, the thirty-nine stipulations of m.*Shabbat* 7:2, are often referenced, with specific attention given to "he who transports an object from one domain to another."¹⁵ The Jewish religious leaders, upon witnessing the healed man picking up his pallet or mat, would have concluded that their *Shabbat* orthopraxy has been violated by Yeshua, perhaps in His healing, but more so in the mat being transferred out of the Pool of Bethesda.

A selection of commentators on the Gospel of John, just about all of whom do not believe in a post-resurrection era continuance of the seventh-day Sabbath, recognize how the accusation of Yeshua breaking the Sabbath almost entirely involved extra-Biblical regulations and/or an interpretive tradition:

- Leon Morris: "He ignored the mass of scribal regulations, and thus inevitably came into conflict with the authorities....They probably had in mind such passages as Jer. 17:21ff., and Neh. 13:15. These were in origin protests against the tendency to secularize the sabbath. It is not just another day of business. It is God's day. It must be kept free from worldly pursuits. So the regulations began in the laudable attempt to safeguard the holiness of the day. But in time they became so many, and drew so many absurd distinctions that the true character of the day was lost in the manner of its observance. Jesus' attitude recalled men to the real meaning of the sabbath."¹⁶

¹³ Tenney, 106.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 135.

¹⁵ Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 187-188.

¹⁶ Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp 305, 306.

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- F.F. Bruce: "The 'tradition of the elders' distinguished thirty-nine categories of work which might not be undertaken on the sabbath; the thirty-ninth of these was the carrying of a load from one dwelling to another. By this standard the man's action in carrying his pallet home was a violation of the sabbath law [m.*Shabbat* 7:2]."¹⁷
- D.A. Carson: "By Old Testament standards, it is not clear the healed man was contravening the law, since he did not normally carry mats around for a living; according to the 'tradition of the elders' the man was breaking the law, since he was contravening one of the prohibited thirty-nine categories of work to which the law was understood to refer."¹⁸
- Bruce Milne: "The day of the healing was the Sabbath and carrying one's bed was a breach of the law of Sabbath observance. Strictly, there was no contravention of the written commandment (cf. Exo. 20:8-11), which was generally interpreted as a prohibition of performing one's daily occupation on the Sabbath. Since the man was not a furniture remover, he could not be accused of 'working' in that sense....The oral traditions, however, which the Pharisees cherished, amplified the written law into an elaborate jurisprudence which significantly extended its range."¹⁹
- Colin G. Kruse: "What the man was accused of (carrying his mat on the sabbath) comes under the general restriction of taking something 'from one domain to another'. Carrying one's mat through the streets of Jerusalem, was certainly a culpable act according to rabbinic law."²⁰
- Andreas J. Köstenberger: "Although the Jewish leaders may have thought of passages such as Exod. 31:12-17, Jer. 17:21-27, and Neh. 13:15-19, the man did not actually break any biblical Sabbath regulations. According to Jewish tradition, however, the man was violating a code that prohibited the carrying of an object 'from one domain into another' (m.*Šabb.* 7.2; in the present instance, his mat). Apparently, it was permissible to carry a bed with a person lying on it, but not one that was empty (m.*Šabb.* 10.5)."²¹
- Craig S. Keener: "Jesus contravened the Pharisaic understanding of the Sabbath (5:8-12; cf. 9:14-16). It was already against the law to carry burdens on the Sabbath, at least insofar as this could be interpreted as work (Num 15:32-35; Jer 17:21). Jesus might not interpret this physical celebration of healing as work, but many of his contemporaries surely would. Carrying anything from one domain to another could be regarded as work....It is doubtful that Jesus himself rejected the Sabbath, though he

¹⁷ Bruce, *John*, 125.

¹⁸ Carson, 244.

¹⁹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 95.

²⁰ Kruse, *John*, 149.

²¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 181.

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clearly interpreted and applied it quite differently from most of his contemporaries.”²²

There is enough reason for it to be concluded that Yeshua the Messiah did not break Torah or Tanach statutes of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Yeshua may have violated the extra-Scriptural statement of *m.Shabbat* 7:2, “he who transports an object from one domain to another,”²³ or *m.Shabbat* 10:5, “[He who takes out] a living person in a bed is exempt even on account of [taking out] the bed, for the bed is secondary to him. [If he took out] a corpse in a bed, he is liable.”²⁴ But, there has been no expressed violation of Moses’ Teaching with Yeshua directing the healed man to pick up his mat, although there has been some disregard for some human applications of various Torah and Tanach directions.

From a translation standpoint, it needs to be recognized how, “it is not lawful for you to carry your pallet” (RSV), “it is against the Law for you to carry your mat” (Goodspeed New Testament), or “It’s against *Torah* for you to carry your mat” (CJB)—all include improper renderings of *ouk exestin* (οὐκ ἔξεστιν). Properly speaking, the verb *exesti* (ἔξεστι) means “it is allowed, it is in one’s power, is possible” (LS),²⁵ and notably lacks the root *nomos* (νόμος) or “law”—such as in 1 Timothy 1:8, “But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully [*nomimōs*, νομίμως]²⁶.” Some more proper renderings of *ouk exestin* in v. 10b include:

- “it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet” (NASU).
- “you aren’t allowed to carry your mat” (Common English Bible).
- “You shouldn’t be carrying your mattress” (Kingdom New Testament).
- “It’s not permitted for you to carry your mat” (TLV).

Three slight paraphrases of *ouk exestin* would include:

- “you have no right to be carrying your mat” (Moffat New Testament).
- “it is not right for you to carry your bed” (Phillips New Testament).
- “It’s against the rules” (The Message).

It should not at all be thought that v. 10 includes the intention that Yeshua the Messiah violated the Sabbath, when no direct Biblical commandments were transgressed. As Bruce astutely concludes,

“In Jesus’ eyes, the sabbath was given to be a blessing and not a burden to human beings, and it was most worthily kept when the purpose for which God gave it was most actively promoted. He therefore regarded acts of healing and relief not as permitted exceptions to the prohibition of work on the sabbath, but as deeds which should be done by preference on that day, because they so signally fulfilled the divine purpose in its institution.”²⁷

5:11-13 When accused of violating the Sabbath because of picking up his pallet or mat at the direction of Yeshua (v. 8), the healed man responded to the Jewish religious

²² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary/Volume One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp 641, 643.

²³ Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 187-188.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁵ LS, 273.

²⁶ “pert. to being in accordance with normal procedure, in accordance with rule(s)/law” (BDAG, 676).

²⁷ Bruce, *John*, 125.

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leaders, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet, and walk'" (v. 11, RSV). As the NIV has for v. 12, "So they asked him, 'Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?'" Yet, the former invalid had no real idea who had healed him, as it is recorded, "But he did not know the One who cured him, for a crowd being in that place, Jesus had withdrawn" (v. 13, LITV).

5:14-15 No specified amount of time is noted as to the duration which passed between the man's healing and him encountering Yeshua again. It is detailed, "Afterwards, Yeshua finds him in the Temple. He said to him, 'Look, you've been healed! Stop sinning, so nothing worse happens to you'" (v. 14, TLV). Sometimes in the Tanach, physical suffering was a consequence of prior sin (1 Kings 13:4; 2 Kings 1:4; 2 Chronicles 16:12). Leon Morris notes how "In 9:1ff. Jesus repudiates the idea that disasters like blindness are inevitably caused by sin. But He does not say that they are never caused by sin. In this present verse He seems to imply that the man's sin had brought about his infirmity."²⁸ Seemingly a worse condition will await the healed individual (cf. 5:22-30), if any past sinfulness is not rectified. Upon hearing this from Yeshua, v. 15 states, "The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well" (TNIV).

5:16 It is fair to recognize, as the text directs, that Yeshua the Messiah performing miracles on the Sabbath is something which the religious leaders were not too pleased with: "Because Yeshua was doing these things on *Shabbat*, the Judean leaders started persecuting Him" (TLV). As the NEB puts it, "It was works of this kind done on the Sabbath that stirred the Jews to persecute Jesus."

5:17 An historical prompt is given to readers of John's Gospel, regarding how, at least subsequent to the scene of the invalid healed at the Pool of Bethesda, Yeshua the Messiah would respond to His detractors among the Jewish religious leaders: "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." Yeshua could have legitimately debated over the minutiae over the application of Sabbath instructions from the Torah with His detractors, *but instead* Yeshua associated His healing abilities with the working of God Himself on the Sabbath—the God who He poignantly refers to as "My Father," and not the more common "our Father," as observant Jews might have prayed.

It is specified in Genesis 2:2-3²⁹ that when the six days or *yamim* (יָמִים) of Creation were completed, that the Creator God rested (Heb. verb *shavat*, שָׁבַת). However, while God ceased from His creative actions for the universe, Planet Earth, and humankind—Jewish theologians and important minds always recognized that God as Creator had to always be in some position of monitoring His Creation (cf. Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.5-6). By the end of the sixth day or *yom* (יּוֹם) of Creation, God ceased His creation of anything new. At the same time, though, God as the Eternal One does have to conduct some ongoing activity as the Being which is sustaining life, upholding the world and universe, and guiding various laws of time and space for the universe. The Father "working" (*ergazetai*, ἐργάζεται) on the Sabbath, involves such a sustaining of the cosmos.

Kruse interjects the compelling thoughts,

²⁸ Morris, *John*, 307.

²⁹ "By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (Genesis 2:2-3).

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“Does he continue to observe the sabbath? Apparently not, for his providential care of the world, his administration of justice (when people die on the sabbath), and his creation of life (when children are born on the sabbath) all continue unabated. Jewish scholars acknowledged this and made efforts to show that while God worked on the sabbath he was not guilty of breaking the sabbath law. They argued that God was not guilty of carrying things from one domain to another, because the whole of creation is his house and so he never carries things ‘outside’.”³⁰

While God Himself, in His activity as Creator of sustaining His universe, is not “guilty” of violating the Sabbath—so Yeshua identifies Himself with His Father, in the statement, “and I am working” (*kagō ergazomai, καὶ γὰρ ἐργάζομαι*). Yeshua’s healing of the invalid, at the Pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, is to be regarded as quantitatively indifferent from the Creator’s ongoing maintenance of the cosmos. In the view of Andreas J. Köstenberger,

“He could have objected to the (inaccurate) Jewish interpretation of the OT Sabbath command that prohibited work normally done on the other six days of the week. These regulations (which referred to regular work) hardly applied to the man’s picking up his mat after a miracle cure. But rather than taking this approach, Jesus places his own activity on the Sabbath plainly on the same level as that of God the Creator. If God is above Sabbath regulations, so is Jesus.”³¹

5:18 Two issues are stated in v. 18, involving the mindset of many of the Jewish religious leaders and their being incensed at the actions of words of Yeshua: “So for this reason the Judean leaders kept trying even harder to kill Him—because He was not only breaking *Shabbat*, but also calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (TLV).

The first action of the Messiah is detailed in the clause *eluen to sabbaton* (ἔλυνεν τὸ σάββατον), frequently rendered as “breaking the Sabbath.” Of course, it does have to be recognized that there was no strict breaking or violation, from the Torah and Tanach, of the seventh-day Sabbath in Yeshua’s healing actions. Craig S. Keener is right to direct, “later Gentile Christian tradition seems likely for the interpretation of this passage that suggests that Jesus either violated or annulled the law. The claim that Jesus annulled the law is not his but of his opponents.”³²

It cannot go unnoticed how the verb *luō* (λύω) can mean “to set free someth. tied or similarly constrained, set free, loose, untie” and “to do away with, destroy, bring to an end, abolish” (BDAG),³³ as well as “to loosen, i.e. weaken, relax” (LS).³⁴ Yeshua’s instruction of Matthew 18:18, “Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose [verb *luō*] on earth shall have been loosed in heaven,” is often and rightly regarded as a statement regarding *halachah* or orthopraxy, the right application of God’s Law for His people. As the Power New Testament interestingly renders v. 18b, “He was loosening on the Sabbath.”³⁵ At the very

³⁰ Kruse, *John*, 151.

³¹ Köstenberger, 185.

³² Keener, *John*, 1:646.

³³ BDAG, pp 606, 607.

³⁴ LS, 482.

³⁵ Also, “because He not only was loosening the Sabbath...” (PME).

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most, given Yeshua's healing on *Shabbat*, Bruce Milne would regard what is seen as "his 'liberal' approach to the Sabbath."³⁶

The second action, which would have far more enraged the Jewish religious leaders (also 8:59; 10:31), is that Yeshua was believed to be committing blasphemy against the God of Israel (cf. Leviticus 24:13-16). As is narrated, "by saying that God was his own Father, he was claiming equality with God" (CJB). More to the point, "but also [his] own~father he was saying the [very] God [to be] equal himself making to the [very] God" (Brown and Comfort),³⁷ *alla kai patera idion elegen ton Theon ison heauton poiōn tō Theō* (ἀλλὰ καὶ πατέρα ἴδιον ἔλεγεν τὸν θεὸν ἴσον ἑαυτὸν ποιῶν τῷ θεῷ). The First Century Jewish philosopher Philo would assert, using similar terminology, "But the selfish and atheistical mind, thinking itself equal with God [*isos einai Theō*, ἴσος εἶναι θεῷ]..." (*Allegorical Interpretation* 1.49).³⁸ Indeed, any human being caught making himself out to be "God," would be viewed as not only guilty of self-deification, but also in significant violation of the thrust of Isaiah 40:25, "To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal [*v'esveh*, הַשְׂוֶה; that I should be like him, RSV; To whom can I be compared, NJPS]?" says the Holy One."

Bruce indicates that to the Jewish religious leaders in view, "here was a man whose words and actions implied a trespass across the inviolable boundary that separated God from mankind."³⁹ Morris further notes, "They discerned that the {presumed} sabbath breaking was no isolated rootless phenomenon. It proceeded from Jesus' view of His person and was consistent with it."⁴⁰

Either Yeshua's direct association with His Father's sustaining actions on the Sabbath are legitimate—and thus Yeshua is Himself legitimately God—or Yeshua of Nazareth was a lunatic and blasphemer, making Himself out to be something He was not. A Messianic Jewish theologian like David H. Stern usefully interjects, "Some Jews would like to reclaim Yeshua for the Jewish people by regarding him as a great teacher, which he was, but only human, not divine. Yeshua's claim here makes that option impossible."⁴¹

While in the minds of Yeshua's detractors, He was guilty of the sin of self-deification, "making" Himself the equal of God—the discussion which will follow in John 5:19-47 actually involves the unique agency of Yeshua as the Son. Far from Yeshua of Nazareth being a mortal man guilty of the blasphemous crime of self-deification, it is in the unique and significant actions that Yeshua is designated to perform, *as the Son sent from the Father*, where His true identity is to be investigated and weighed. Yeshua the Messiah did not "make" Himself God, but rather His unique identity—and integration into the Divine Identity—is predicated on His being sent from the Father.⁴²

³⁶ Milne, 96.

³⁷ Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, trans., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 335.

³⁸ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 30.

³⁹ Bruce, *John*, 127.

⁴⁰ Morris, *John*, 310.

⁴¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 169.

⁴² For a further discussion, consult the relevant sections of *Salvation on the Line: The Nature of Yeshua and His Divinity* by J.K. McKee (forthcoming).

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John 5:1-18 application On the whole, Messianic Bible readers of the past would probably have been cued in enough to recognize that some kind of extra-Biblical instruction and/or *halachah* is in view for Yeshua being criticized for potential Sabbath violation (vs. 10, 16, 18). But, possible violation for the sorts of regulations detailed in m.*Shabbat* 7:2 or 10:5 might not have registered. Likewise, reasoning through the larger sequence of events might not have been conducted.

There have, for certain, been various approaches to the scene of John 5:1-18, and the Messiah's presumed *Shabbat* violation, by a number of Messianic examiners. On the whole, one will find the view stressed that Yeshua's healing of the invalid man far exceeded any punctilious or rigid observance of *Shabbat*, and that any of Yeshua's contemporaries who were unable to see such a healing as being a Divine act of importance—were indeed limited persons at best. Broadly representative of such an approach is Stern, in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*:

"It's against *Torah* for you to carry your mat, that is, against the Judeans' (see 1:19N) or Pharisees' (see Mt 3:7N) understanding of the *Torah*, against their tradition, against what later became Jewish *halakhah*. Jeremiah 17:21-22 speaks against bearing a burden on *Shabbat*, but the context suggests that the prohibition is against working for profit, as at Nehemiah 13:19. The Mishna makes carrying in a public area on *Shabbat* unlawful. But in a walled city like Yerushalayim a special legal arrangement called an '*eruv* [עֲרֻב] makes it legal to carry on *Shabbat*. Perhaps the man had his home outside the walls of Yerushalayim, beyond the range of the '*eruv*'; or he may have been homeless and slept on his mat each night outside the city. Another possibility: he had not left Yerushalayim and was still in the Temple area, but the Judeans perceived that he was about to leave and were warning him not to violate *Shabbat* by carrying his mat through the gates. Note, however, that the Judeans miraculously ignored the miraculous healing and concerned themselves only with the infringement of their version of the Law; they could not see that the formerly crippled man's ability to carry his mat attested to God's glory."⁴³

Widely recognizing that a violation of Sabbath directives in the Jewish oral tradition is what Yeshua would be accused of, are the comments of Joel Liberman, in his co-authored commentary on the Gospel of John:

"The purpose of our traditions are to point us to God and to enable us to worship and adore and praise God as well as to direct us in how to live out that worship and adoration and praise to God in everyday living—how we can perform concrete acts of mercy and forgiveness in the way that God acts them out toward us...It's a pitiful sight here as we read how our Jewish people are incensed that Yeshua would violate their understanding of Sabbath law even if His reason for doing so was to show the act of mercy toward this man who was lame."⁴⁴

Liberman goes on to note the point,

"Nothing made some of the *P'rushim* [Pharisees] angrier with Yeshua than what they considered to be His gross disregard for laws governing the Sabbath. Although He could

⁴³ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 169.

⁴⁴ Joel Liberman & James Murphy, *Lifted Up—Between a Pharisee & a Thief: An In-Depth Look at the Gospel of John by a Jewish Rabbi...and a Convicted Felon* (San Diego: Tree of Life, 2014), pp 78-79.

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regularly be found in the Synagogue where He read and taught Scripture on *Shabbat*, His detractors believed He was continually disregarding the laws concerning this sacred day....{proceeds to reference m.*Shabbat* 7:2}."45

Liberman does not at all draw the inappropriate conclusion that Yeshua the Messiah as a Sabbath breaker. Instead, Liberman properly directs,

"[T]he lifting of his mat was one of the conditions for [the invalid's] cure! In Yeshua's eyes, the *Shabbat* was given to be a blessing, and not a burden to human beings, and it was most worthily kept when the purpose for which God gave it was most actively promoted. Yeshua therefore regarded acts of healing and relief not as permitted exceptions to the prohibition of work on the *Shabbat*, but as deeds which should be done on that day, because they so fulfilled the divine purpose in its institution."46

Such a thought—that Yeshua's healing of the invalid fulfilled the Divine purpose for the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*—**is one which is most commendable and laudable!**

From a bit more of a conservative and traditional framework, are the thoughts of D. Thomas Lancaster, in his book *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels' Sabbath Conflicts*. He recognizes that some sort of violation of customary Jewish Sabbath observance is being portrayed in John 5:1-18, but makes an affirmation that the *halachah* against carrying the mat is based on Tanach Scripture, and thus not to be too easily dismissed. Lancaster indicates,

"Ordinarily, Christian readers dismiss the law against carrying an object on the Sabbath day as a rabbinic fiction. The interpretation of the law is part of Jewish tradition, but the law is itself based squarely upon biblical text....{quoting Exodus 16:29; Jeremiah 17:21-22}....The laws of carrying are extremely complex, and we do not know exactly how they were understood or practiced in the days of the Master."47

Lancaster later proceeds to elucidate over whether or not Yeshua violated *Shabbat*, by noting how on the one hand Christian people have commonly thought that He intended to abrogate the seventh-day Sabbath, and how on the other, various others have thought that Yeshua was only in conflict with extra-Biblical regulations. Lancaster sets up an argument from silence in the following quotation, designed to emphasize that some (significant) value is to be given to the Oral Torah in regard to what may and may not be done on *Shabbat*:

"We might suppose that he told him to carry his bedroll in order to make a public statement. Christian interpretation ordinary assumes that Jesus wanted to prove to everyone that the Sabbath has been abolished. Hebrew-roots, Sabbatarian interpretations often assume that, while upholding the biblical Sabbath, Jesus demonstrated that the prohibition on carrying an object on the Sabbath is an unjustified rabbinic fiction. Perhaps by telling the man to carry his mat, Jesus demonstrated that carrying an object in a public space does not violate the Sabbath. If so, he was thereby encouraging people to throw off the rules of traditional Judaism and begin carrying objects around on the Sabbath.

45 Ibid., pp 81-82.

46 Ibid., 82.

47 D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels' Sabbath Conflicts* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2013), 66.

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"This interpretation does not work. Jesus never did make any statements about carrying on the Sabbath. In John 5, he did not stay behind to defend the man or argue Sabbath halachah with the sages. Instead, Jesus slipped away from sight, fading into the crowd. He did not attempt to correct their interpretation, and he offered no legal justification for carrying on the Sabbath.

"He himself did not carry, nor did his prosecutors ever accuse him or any of his followers of carrying on the Sabbath. So why does he tell the man to carry his bedroll on the Sabbath?

"To our great sorrow, the Gospel of John omits any explanation and shifts to focus on the question of whether or not Jesus is justified in healing on the Sabbath. John leaves the entire bedroll incident unexplained and unresolved. Nevertheless, we may still indulge in some speculation around the question."⁴⁸

Lancaster goes on to broadly conclude that Yeshua violated various customary Sabbath rulings and stipulations, because mercy and compassion for people should be thought to override any ceremonial *Shabbat* regulation. He notably does not think, that as a normal weekly practice, that the Messiah would have violated Jewish *halachah* on carrying:

"[O]ther stories about Jesus healing on the Sabbath always point toward the weightier provisions of Torah. In those stories, the Master justifies violating the Sabbath for the sake of alleviating human suffering on the basis of a passage from Hosea 6:6...{quoting Matthew 12:7}...He used the passage to teach that compassion for human beings, specifically the alleviation of human suffering, takes precedence over ceremonial concern....

"Jesus prioritized mercy (*chesed*) above ceremonial concern and told the man to get up, go, and take his mat with him. In so doing, Jesus did not abrogate the prohibition on carrying on the Sabbath or declare that prohibition illegitimate. Neither did he criticize Jewish tradition about the Sabbath. Instead, he acted according to a higher ethical standard that says mercy on a human being overrides ceremonial prohibitions when necessary. Even according to strict rabbinic law, human dignity should take precedence."⁴⁹

Messianic readers on the whole will be able to recognize how the scene of John 5:1-18 does not constitute a strict violation of the Biblical Sabbath by Yeshua the Messiah, in directing the healed invalid to pick up and carry the man on which he had been lying. This mat did not constitute some part of his livelihood, falling into the rubric of Numbers 15:32-35 and Jeremiah 17:21. Carrying a straw pad or mat which weighed a few pounds, at best, was hardly a violation of the Sabbath, even when understood through traditional Jewish approaches.

The ability for the healed man to carry his mat was **to indeed serve as a visible testimony of His healing**. Such a healing was representative of the significant substance of *Shabbat* being intended as a time of rest and refreshment—*human wholeness*. Indeed, those who strive to remember the Sabbath as a time when men and women entreat their Creator, and commune with Him in a special way—naturally rejoice when the infirm are

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp 67-68.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp 72, 73.

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healed of their infirmities, the poor are no longer impoverished, and justice is served to those who have been wronged!