

### Luke 14:1-6

#### “Yeshua Healing a Man on the Sabbath”

“It happened that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on *the* Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. And there in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. And Yeshua answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?’ But they kept silent. And He took hold of him and healed him, and sent him away. And He said to them, ‘Which one of you will have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?’ And they could make no reply to this.”

**Luke 14:1** The Luke 14:1-6 account, of Yeshua healing a man with dropsy on the Sabbath, is unique to Luke’s Gospel. This record begins with, “Now when Yeshua went into the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees to eat a meal on *Shabbat*, they were watching Him closely” (TLV). While many readers will be necessarily guided to want to consider the scene which follows, and in particular whether or not Yeshua would be accused of violating the Sabbath in some way—what can escape too many readers is the fact that Yeshua the Messiah actually keeps the Sabbath! And here, not only does He keep the Sabbath, but He is welcomed into the home of some prominent religious leaders for a meal. As Joel B. Green usefully indicates,

“Luke has repeatedly advised his readers that Jesus’ custom was to observe the Sabbath (e.g., 4:16). In this setting, which introduces a larger dining scene nestled between episodes of traveling (13:22-25; 14:25-35), Luke continues this characterization, depicting Jesus enjoying Sabbath-day hospitality following the synagogue service.”<sup>1</sup>

It is stated that Yeshua went into the home of *tinōs tōn archontōn [tōn] Pharisaiōn* (τινος τῶν ἀρχόντων [τῶν] Φαρισαίων), “a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees” (RSV) or “a certain one of the chiefs of the Pharisees” (YLT). That this was some kind of a leader at a local synagogue, who was to be theologically identified with the Pharisees, is a sure conclusion. Some have thought that this Pharisee was a member of the Sanhedrin,<sup>2</sup> which if so would likely require that this scene take place in Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

Yeshua went to eat at a Pharisee’s home on *Shabbat*, this presumably being some kind of a meal eaten following a synagogue service, where there would be continued fellowship and discussion. Yeshua was being respected, by at least His host, in being invited to a meal as an important teacher. While it is asserted how “they were closely observing Him” (LITV), Green makes the critical point of stating, “Luke has not portrayed all Pharisees with a single hue, with the consequence that the level of animosity that surfaced in 11:53-54 cannot simply be regarded as characteristic of all Pharisees.”<sup>4</sup> Yeshua’s host had to have been open to Him and His message, even though there were others present who were skeptical to negative about Him. R. Alan Culpepper, however, has a more open-ended perspective, in his comment, “A guest was accepted as an equal, and Jesus might understandably have been watched closely to see whether he would

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<sup>1</sup> Green, 543.

<sup>2</sup> Liefeld, in *EXP*, 8:976.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 578; Ellis, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Green, 546.

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follow the prescribed norms of etiquette, which allowed both guest and host to be honored.”<sup>5</sup>

While a commentator like Green appropriately emphasizes that readers not make broad conclusions about the Pharisees, given the venue of Yeshua the Messiah eating at the home of a Pharisee on *Shabbat*, with others looking on, necessarily directs one to some kind of an encounter regarding what is and what is not permitted on the Sabbath. Events are in motion for Yeshua to demonstrate who He is and what He stands for, to those present. As Green directs,

“The question of appropriate Sabbath behavior was an important one, much debated but scrupulously enforced through socio-religious sanctions related to one’s status in the community. Because Jesus has made a practice of healing on the Sabbath, much to the consternation of those who read the Mosaic law differently...we may anticipate yet another healing on the Sabbath attended by questions of propriety and conflict....There is also the motif of redemptive opportunity, represented most obviously by the possibility of again interpreting the Sabbath as a time for healing.”<sup>6</sup>

Among Messianic examiners, D. Thomas Lancaster has written on this scene in his 2013 book *The Sabbath Breaker*. He makes an appropriate notation of m.*Avot* 3:3 in the Mishnah, and how the meal between Yeshua and those gathered, would necessarily have to be focused on the Word of God:

“R. Simeon says, ‘Three who ate at a single table and did not talk about teachings of Torah while at that table are as though they ate from *dead sacrifices* (Ps. 106:28), as it is said *For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness [if they are] without God* (Ps. 106:28). But three who ate at a single table and did talk about teachings of Torah while at that table are as if they ate at the table of the Omnipresent, blessed is he, as it is said, *And he said to me, This is the table that is before the Lord* (Ez. 41:22)” (m.*Avot* 3:3).<sup>7</sup>

Lancaster poses a number of background postulations, as to what may have motivated the invitation for Yeshua to join the various religious leaders gathered for a meal on *Shabbat*:

“In this case, the prominent Pharisee invited Jesus to his table specifically regarding a certain matter of Torah. Perhaps the disciples of that particular sage had engaged in the argument over whether or not healing justifies violating the Sabbath. The argument may well have ensued after hearing reports of the controversy around Jesus of Nazareth. The theological conundrum created by Jesus’ seemingly divine, Sabbath-day healings must have piqued their acute interest in the question. If such healings did indeed constitute a violation of the Sabbath, why did God validate them through this man? One can imagine the argument that initiated the dinner invitation. ‘How can he be a real prophet if he heals on the Sabbath?’ ‘But is it really a sin to heal on the Sabbath?’ ‘Let’s invite the man and see what he will say,’ they might have suggested.”<sup>8</sup>

**Luke 14:2** The text does not say how the individual suffering from an ailment arrived on the scene; one could assume that he was brought in from outside, or had even been told to show up at the Pharisee’s home sometime on the *Shabbat* afternoon. Most

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<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:284.

<sup>6</sup> Green, 545.

<sup>7</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 678-679.

<sup>8</sup> Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 58.

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versions will have something along the lines of, "And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy" (RSV). There are those who will have a more interpretive rendering of this disease: "a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body" (TNIV/2011 NIV), "a man with swollen legs" (Contemporary English Version), "a man hugely swollen in his joints" (The Message), "a man swollen with fluid" (TLV). The Louw-Nida Lexicon defines *hudrōpikos* (ὕδρωπικός) with, "pertaining to swelling resulting from the accumulation of lymph in the body tissues - 'suffering from dropsy.'"<sup>9</sup> It has been interjected how many Jews of a later period believed that this disease was the consequence of immorality,<sup>10</sup> but the point of what is witnessed here is that a person suffering from a physically debilitating condition, is going to find himself healed on *Shabbat* by Yeshua, in the view of some religious leaders.

**Luke 14:3** Some kind of tension was present, as the man with dropsy appears and Yeshua encounters him. The narration records, "Yeshua spoke up and asked the *Torah* experts and *P'rushim*, 'Does the *Torah* allow healing on *Shabbat* or not?'" (CJB). Regardless of how it is translated, Yeshua does pose a question to those present. Noting the more customary rendering present in English versions, Walter L. Liefeld indicates, "'Is it lawful' may have been intentionally ambiguous, a leading question that could be answered in terms of either OT or rabbinical 'law.'"<sup>11</sup> Various Christian readers might assume that the Torah or Law of Moses prohibited some kind of healing on the Sabbath, given how most English versions pose the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" Here, it has to be recognized how the verb *exesti* (ἔξεστι) means, "it is possible, it is permitted, it is lawful" (Peschbacher),<sup>12</sup> notably lacking the root *nomos* (νόμος) or "law," especially as v. 3 includes a reference to *tous nomikous* (τοὺς νομικοὺς) or "the lawyers" ("the Torah lawyers," TLV). Some better renderings witnessed of v. 3 include:

- "so Jesus asked the jurists and Pharisees, 'Is it right to heal on the sabbath or not?'" (Moffat New Testament).
- "So Jesus spoke to the scribes and Pharisees and asked, Well, is it right to heal on the Sabbath day or not?" (Phillips New Testament).
- "So Jesus asked the religion scholars and Pharisees present, 'Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath? Yes or no?'" (The Message).
- "So Yeshua said to the Torah lawyers and the Pharisees, 'Is it permitted to heal on *Shabbat*, or not?'" (TLV).

Leon Morris observes how the question posed about whether or not it was permitted to heal on the Sabbath, very much did not involve the Torah of Moses proper, but instead various interpretations and applications present among various Jewish religious leaders:

"According to the rabbinic regulations it certainly was not lawful; healing could take place on the sabbath only when there was danger to life. In this case the man would probably not have died if the case had been stood over until sundown. To agree to healing under these circumstances could lead to an accusation that they were 'soft' on law enforcement. But on the other hand *lawful* might mean contained in the law of Moses'.

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<sup>9</sup> BibleWorks 9.0: Louw-Nida Lexicon. MS Windows 7 Release. Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2011. DVD-ROM. Cf. Green, pp 546-547 for a summary of ancient views involving dropsy.

<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1256.

<sup>11</sup> Liefeld, in *EXP*, 8:976.

<sup>12</sup> Wesley J. Peschbacher, ed., *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 150.

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There is nothing in Scripture to forbid such healing; it was the rabbinic interpretation of Scripture that was the source of the rule. To insist publicly on this interpretation might lead to a charge of indifference to human suffering. Small wonder that *they were silent*.<sup>13</sup>

Yeshua would not have violated Torah Sabbath commandments by healing the man with dropsy, although He could have been accused of violating some of the traditional *halachah*. The man with dropsy could be healed after *Shabbat*, as his condition was not immediately life threatening, and he presumably had it for a while. Green actually thinks that this scene should have enabled those present with enough before them to induce some kind of discussion about what is permissible on the Sabbath. He says, "For the reader, Jesus' capacity to determine what constitutes acceptable Sabbath observance has already been established (6:5), though it is worth remembering that the pivotal issue here is that the OT Sabbath law was nebulous enough to require (and invite) discussion concerning its observance."<sup>14</sup>

**Luke 14:4** After having asked about the permissiveness of healing on *Shabbat*, it is stated, "But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away" (NIV). In the view of Green, "Jesus' point is that scribal specifications have missed the salvific purpose of God resident in the Sabbath; Jesus, in declaring the onset of the eschatological jubilee...has made this day, even the Sabbath day ('today,' 4:21), the day of divine benefaction for the needy."<sup>15</sup>

**Luke 14:5-6** Yeshua inquires, "Which of you, with a son or an ox falling into a well on *Yom Shabbat*, will not immediately pull him out?" (TLV). Here, some of the terms present in Deuteronomy 5:14 are detectable: "but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you." It does have to be recognized how there is some textual variant in v. 5, as the NKJV has, "Which of you, having a **donkey or an ox** that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" Other textual witnesses have "son" (NASU) or "child" (NRSV), which are agreed as being more original.<sup>16</sup>

It is certainly witnessed in the Mishnah how many Jews of Second Temple times indeed offered assistance to animals *and* people in need on the Sabbath:

"They do not deliver the young of cattle on the festival, but they help out. And they do deliver the young of a woman on the Sabbath. They call a midwife for her from a distant place, and they violate the Sabbath on her [the woman in childbirth's] account. And they tie the umbilical cord. R. Yose says, 'Also: They cut it.' And all things required for circumcision do they perform on the Sabbath" (m.*Shabbat* 18:3; also b.*Shabbat* 128b).<sup>17</sup>

Quite contrary to Yeshua recognizing that many of the lawyers and Pharisees present, would indeed offer aid to an animal or child on the Sabbath—"Which of you, if a

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 252.

<sup>14</sup> Green, 547.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 548.

<sup>16</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 164.

<sup>17</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 201-202.

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son or an ox falls into a well, will hesitate to haul him out on *Shabbat*?" (v. 5, CJB)—is how those of the Essene sect would not help animals or other people on *Shabbat*:

"No one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath; and if it falls into a well or a pit, he may not lift it out on the Sabbath. No one should rest in a place near to Gentiles on the Sabbath. No one should profane the Sabbath for wealth or spoil on the Sabbath. Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with ladder, rope, or other instrument" (CD 11.13-17).<sup>18</sup>

Craig A. Evans makes the important point of how "Such a rescue operation would in most cases involve far more work than any healing involves for Jesus."<sup>19</sup> That there was indeed divergence among ancient Jewish sects, in terms of rescuing either animals or other people on the Sabbath, is recognized by commentators. Culpepper summarizes,

"Various Jewish groups took different positions on whether one would be allowed to rescue an animal from a ditch on the sabbath, but there was apparently no such argument in the case of a child. The Mosaic law stipulated that one should help an animal in distress, but did not make clear whether this should be carried out on the sabbath also (Exod 23:5; Deut 22:4). The Damascus Document takes the more stringent view...On the other hand, the Mishnah, while it forbids delivering the young of cattle on a festival day, allows one to help the dam and allows for summoning a midwife for a woman, delivering a baby, tying up the umbilical cord, and performing circumcision {referencing m.*Shabbat* 18:3}."<sup>20</sup>

Others, per Yeshua's question in v. 5, think that a more common sense appeal is all that is necessary. Morris simply concludes, "Jesus probably means that in the absence of a regulation a man would find some way of justifying his procedure. He would not leave an animal in a pit on a sabbath."<sup>21</sup> While referencing some of the sources from the DSS, Mishnah, and Talmud, Lancaster surprisingly tends to speak along more common sense lines as well here:

"None of them would hesitate to violate the Sabbath in order to rescue one of their animals or children from a well on the Sabbath day. In this instance, the argument asks: If it is permissible to violate Shabbat in order to immediately rescue a life or alleviate an animal's suffering, why should they postpone the infirm man's healing?

"Apparently, the prominent Pharisee and his disciples accepted the Master's reasoning."<sup>22</sup>

It is narrated, "And to these things they could give no answer" (v. 6, CJB) or "They were stumped. There was nothing they could say to that" (The Message). Yeshua's reasoning in terms of rescuing an animal or another person on the Sabbath, served the intention of recognizing how healing someone of a malady, is quantitatively the same. Morris describes, "they may have perceived that his case was based on the fact that the sabbath was instituted for people's good. Their emergency procedures gave testimony to this, just as did Jesus' works of mercy."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, 219.

<sup>20</sup> Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:284-285.

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 253.

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**Luke 14:1-6 application** Few people in today's Messianic movement would even think that the scene of Luke 14:1-6 bears any intention of the Messiah abolishing the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* by healing the individual with dropsy. Still, it does need to be recognized how there are Christian readers of Luke 14:1-6 who may conclude this, although there are commentators who properly recognize how the issue in view is application of Sabbath instructions, and the permissibility of rescuing people or healing people on the Sabbath.

David L. Balch properly describes, "The sabbath is a holy day, not abrogated, but a day on which one is 'set free from bondage' (Luke 13:16), and on which one may cure those consumed by passion or save a child or an animal that has fallen into a hole (14:5; cf. 1 Macc 2:32-41)."<sup>24</sup> Culpepper directs that for Luke 14:1-6, "Human need takes precedence over sabbath observance. Observance of the sabbath was intended as a gift of rest and restoration. Jesus' healings on the sabbath not only restore the proper priority of meeting human need but also underscore the true meaning of the sabbath itself."<sup>25</sup> These are hardly conclusions supportive of an anti-Sabbath position on the part of Yeshua. Culpepper further speaks of how "In this story, religious duties are redefined to place priority on meeting the physical needs of fellow human beings,"<sup>26</sup> hence involving how the rest and refreshment of the Sabbath is to manifest itself in the lives of people who need physical restoration, among other ailments or deterrents to their quality of life.

Robert H. Stein approaches Luke 14:1-6 from the vantage point of what Luke's patron Theophilus (1:3) would think when encountering Yeshua healing on the Sabbath. He thinks, "Theophilus saw that God's commandments were not about external conformity but about acting with love, justice, and mercy. What better way to honor the Sabbath than to do good and to heal. What the law requires is love in action (6:27-36; 10:25-37), not appearances."<sup>27</sup> Stein is correct in how acts of mercy are hardly prohibited on the Sabbath, but such acts of mercy do not nullify the value of receiving rest on the Sabbath.

Green actually comes to a conclusion here which Messianic Believers, who strongly identify as Yeshua-centric in their faith, should appreciate. He says that "the current scene [is] an attempt on Jesus' part to challenge the social world of his table companions and to invite them to share in the redemption God has made available on the Sabbath. In order to do so, they must reorient their lives around the values and dispositions that surface in a healing act that brings near the new world order known in Luke's Gospel as the kingdom of God (cf. 13:18-19)."<sup>28</sup> **Yeshua's Sabbath is more than just about rest from labor, attending synagogue, receiving important teaching from the Scriptures, or even eating a meal with others after services.** *Yeshua's Sabbath is about the power of the Kingdom of God manifesting itself in significant miracles.* For certain, as Green asserts, Luke 14:1-6 "establishes Jesus as an authoritative teacher who is able to determine what constitutes acceptable Sabbath observance."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Balch, in *ECB*, 1136.

<sup>25</sup> Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:285.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Stein, 387.

<sup>28</sup> Green, 544.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 548.