

GOSPELS AND ACTS

Mark 1:21-22; Luke 4:16

“Yeshua Teaching on the Sabbath”

“They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and *began* to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:21-22).

Mark 1:21-22 The wider setting of Yeshua teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum, is preceded with the Messiah calling out to the new disciples Simon, Andrew, James, and John, as they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee (1:16-19). These individuals immediately follow Yeshua (1:20), and going into Capernaum, it is noted how Yeshua enters into the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach (1:21-22). While in the synagogue, the Lord encounters someone demon possessed, whose occupying demonic spirits recognized Yeshua as being “the Holy One of God” (1:23-24). The demonic presence is cast out by the Lord (1:25-26), with Yeshua beginning to gain a reputation throughout Galilee (1:27-28).

In evaluating the practices of Yeshua in His ministry, it is certainly to be recognized that as soon as He called the fishermen to follow Him, that in the narrative *kai euthus tois sabbasin eiselhōn eis tēn sunagōgēn* (καὶ εὐθὺς τοῖς σάββασι εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν), “Right away, on *Shabbat*, He entered the synagogue” (TLV). More customarily, the adverb (εὐθὺς), “*straight, direct*” (LS),¹ is rendered as “immediately” (NASU). Some of this is likely stylistic to the Gospel of Mark, which frequently employs *euthus* to describe the ongoing nature of Yeshua’s actions. At the same time, going to synagogue services in Capernaum, as He begins to gain a following, demonstrates how normative Yeshua’s actions were as not only a Torah faithful Jew, but with them all as members of the Jewish community. *They kept the Sabbath*. The usage of the dative (case indicating indirect object) plural *sabbasin* in v. 21, is not a problem, as C.E.B. Cranfield indicates, “The plural is used with a singular meaning, as is the case with festivals...though occasionally *σάββατα* [*sabbata*] is a true plural, as in Acts xvii.2.”²

How important was it for Yeshua and these first disciples to show up to services on *Shabbat*, at the synagogue in Capernaum? While the focus in vs. 21b-22 is on the Messiah’s ability to teach, when contrasted to those normal synagogue officials who would teach, Larry W. Hurtado makes the point in his commentary on Mark, to detail how important the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath was for Second Temple Judaism:

“The command to observe the seventh day of the week as a day of rest from labor and a time of religious reflection appears in the OT law codes (Exod. 10:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15), and the obedience to this command became a major distinguishing feature of Jewish life. By the time of Jesus there was already great symbolical importance attached to the Sabbath. The longed-for kingdom of God was regarded as the Sabbath of human history....

¹ LS, 326.

² C.E.B. Cranfield, *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 72.

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“By Jesus’ time the synagogue had become a familiar Jewish institution, though it is not mentioned in the OT. It appears that during or after the Babylonian exile religious Jews began to meet on the Sabbath for prayer and religious instruction, and from this practice the fully developed synagogue institution arose...[I]t appears that a somewhat standardized order of service was followed, consisting of prayers (including recited, set prayers), readings from the OT, and a sermon of some sort. In Jesus’ time synagogues were not led by a professional rabbi as in modern times. Instead, there were lay leaders who supervised the meetings. If the synagogue meeting included someone known as a teacher of religion, that person would be invited to give the sermon. In the present episode, Jesus is apparently shown giving the sermon, having been invited to do so on account of his growing reputation.”³

Mark focuses on the reaction of the people when they heard Him teaching: “They were astonished at His teaching because, unlike the scribes, He was teaching them as one having authority” (v. 22, HCSB). Amazement or astonishment by crowds or onlookers, is certainly described throughout the Gospel of Mark, in response to Yeshua’s actions, teachings, or statements (2:12; 5:20, 42; 6:2, 51; 7:37; 10:27, 32; 11:18; 12:17; 15:5). Here at the Capernaum synagogue, the astonishment of the audience, had to have put Him into some conflict with others. It is specifically noted *hōs exousian echōn kai ouχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς* (*ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς*), “for he was teaching them as having authority, and not as the scribes (YLT). On the whole, the scribes or the *soferim* (סוֹפְרִים) were to be regarded as a sub-set of the Pharisees. Yeshua the Messiah possessed a unique authority, such scribes which they did not have. As Ben Witherington III details,

“The γραμματεῖς [*grammateus*] were not in the main scribes, but rather those who were literate, could read and write, and so could quite naturally become the authorities in the Law, responsible for its interpretation and application...Their authority was based on their learning, whereas Jesus’ seemed to be like that of a prophet—someone who had received a word of God without study.”⁴

The main difference, between the scribes and Yeshua, is notably not stated in v. 22 to be their basic theology, or their orientation to the Scriptures of the Torah and Tanach. The main difference, between the scribes and Yeshua, is how Yeshua’s authority was different. Cranfield actually draws attention to how Yeshua’s teachings were quite consistent with many of the ancient Jewish Rabbis, but how His conviction of authority was different:

“Though, compared with the other evangelists, Mark does not give much of the actual teaching of Jesus, he does, like them, lay very great stress on Jesus’ teaching ministry. Both in form and matter his teaching was thoroughly in the Rabbinic tradition. Fundamental for him as for the Rabbis was the conviction that the will of God is revealed in the scriptures alone and especially in the Law. Where he differed from them was partly in the seriousness and consistency with which he followed out of their own basic presupposition, but above all in his consciousness of personal authority.”⁵

³ Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 32.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 90.

⁵ Cranfield, *Mark*, 72.

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Indeed, as one evaluates the place of Sabbath instructions and applications, one sees that the *halachah*, or orthopraxy of the Messiah, tended to sit well within the orbit of a great number of the discussions of Second Temple Judaism. Yeshua the Messiah was not some rogue, completely out to demolish all traditions and customary ways of doing things. Cranfield indicates that “he may well have had more than elementary Rabbinic education,”⁶ but the real issue, as will be seen, is that the Messiah did not have the “authorization,” as it were, from the powers at be. Yeshua’s authority originated from God, which without any significant investigation by First Century Jewish people, would indicate by default that Yeshua was some sort of prophet. William L. Lane further elaborates,

“Jesus’ word, presented with a sovereign authority which permitted neither debate nor theoretical reflection, confronted the congregation with the absolute claim of God upon their whole person. Jesus’ teaching recalled the categorical demand of the prophets rather than scribal tradition....In contrast with rabbinic exposition, with its reference to the tradition of the elders, here was prophecy. The authority with which Jesus spoke presupposes a commission and authorization from God inseparable from the proclamation of the kingdom drawn near.”⁷

Indeed, the Sabbath observance and application of Yeshua the Messiah can only be properly understood, as a manifestation of the Kingdom of God and its power—and *most especially its potential to enact peace, tranquility, and refreshment*—wrought upon human beings.

“And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read” (Luke 4:16).

Luke 4:16 In Luke’s Gospel, this encounter in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16-30), is preceded by the temptation of Yeshua in the wilderness (4:1-13), and is then followed by another Sabbath scene in Capernaum (4:31-37). This account is well known to Bible readers, as it involves Yeshua the Messiah being invited to speak to those gathered, He reads from the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2), and He declares that Isaiah’s prophecy has been fulfilled in Himself (4:21). Bewilderment catches those in attendance (4:22-24), leading to a fit of rage, with Yeshua ultimately escaping being pushed over a cliff (4:28-29). While there are many important details here as they involve Yeshua’s dynamic teaching abilities, His Messiahship, and the reaction of many people to His presence—what does Luke 4:16 actually communicate about the Sabbath observance of Yeshua? Is the mention of *Shabbat* in Luke 4:16 just a notation as to when His reading of Isaiah 61:1-2 took place? Is it just a factoid to be passed over?

The statement of importance is *kata to eiōthos autō en tē hēmera tōn sabbatōn eis tēn sunagōgēn* (κατὰ τὸ εἰωθὸς αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν), “according

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp 72-73.

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to the custom of him on the day of the sabbaths into the synagogue" (Marshall).⁸ The presence of the plural "sabbaths" (LITV) in the source text is not something irregular, as I. Howard Marshall indicates, "the use of the plural of σαββάτων [*sabbatōn*] for the singular is well-attested."⁹

Luke 4:16 recording, "Now when he went to Natzeret, where he had been brought up, on *Shabbat* he went to the synagogue as usual. He stood up to read" (CJB), demonstrates an intention for Yeshua the Messiah not just observing the seventh-day Sabbath every week, but also attending synagogue services. Yeshua's involvement with synagogue activities, wherever He was, did not just take place because the local synagogue was a convenient place to meet people. David H. Stern forthrightly and correctly states in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, "**He went to the synagogue as usual**, like any good Jew."¹⁰ Walter L. Liefeld similarly says, "Luke stresses Jesus' Jewish piety with a reference to his custom of synagogue attendance."¹¹ Robert H. Stein goes even further, notably indicating, "Even as Jesus attended the synagogue and temple, so would the early church {referencing in footnote: Acts 2:46; 3:1; 4:1; 5:12, 42; 6:9; 9:2, 20; 13:5, 14, 43; 21:26; also Acts 17:2}."¹²

A number of commentators, given the description by Luke of Yeshua reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue (4:17-20), will go into some of the major procedures of the ancient synagogue service in Second Temple Judaism.¹³ Stein details in his commentary,

"Luke implied that the ruler of the synagogue (*archisynagogos*; cf. Acts 13:15) invited Jesus to read and comment on the Scriptures. This is the oldest account we possess of a synagogue service, which apparently contained the following: the singing of a psalm; the reading of the Shema (Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21); the repetition of the Eighteen Blessings (the *Shemoneh Esreh*); a reading of the Law in Hebrew, followed by a translation in Aramaic from the targum since Hebrew was no longer used and understood by the average person; a reading from the Prophets in Hebrew, followed by a translation in Aramaic from the targum; a sermon on the Scripture; and a concluding blessing by the ruler of the synagogue."¹⁴

A dissenting opinion of *kata to eiōthos autō* is represented by John Nolland, and needs to be recognized: "'as was his custom,' is a reference back to v 15. It refers to Jesus' synagogue teaching habits...not to his earlier practice in Nazareth, nor generally to his

⁸ Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear KJV-NIV Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 177.

⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 181.

¹⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 113.

¹¹ Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:866.

¹² Robert H. Stein, *New American Commentary: Luke* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 155.

¹³ Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp 115-116; Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 73; R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 9:3-490.

¹⁴ Stein, 155.

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practice of attending synagogue.”¹⁵ From this vantage point, “as was His custom,” only relates to Yeshua’s pattern of entering into a new town, and then finding a place where He could encounter people and teach them: “And He *began* teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all” (Luke 4:15).

No reader of the Gospels can deny that when Yeshua would enter into a new place, He would often make an effort to meet the local people. Yet, any interpretation of Luke 4:16, “And He came to Natzeret, where He had been raised. As was His custom, He went into the synagogue on *Shabbat*, and He got up to read” (TLV), which only focuses on Yeshua’s teaching people at the synagogue—can definitely be taken as disregarding Yeshua’s personal and habitual Sabbath observance. Among a selection of commentators, Joel B. Green is actually quite fair in concluding that Yeshua had a genuine commitment to keeping the Sabbath, but that He most certainly used the weekly Sabbath as a time to issue a proclamation of the Kingdom of God:

“Questions about its origins aside, it is clear that the synagogue occupied a central place in Jewish religious observance by the first century. As this text exemplifies, on the Sabbath the synagogue was especially the locus for the reading and exposition of Scripture—a practice sanctioned with appeal to Mosaic commandment. What is more, synagogue architecture seems to have encouraged free exchange among those assembled and synagogue practice allowed anyone to speak who had something of significance to say; again, this is presumed in 4:16-30 (cf. Acts 13:15). Luke’s presentation indicates not only that Jesus regularly demonstrated his piety by attendance of the synagogue on the Sabbath, but also that it was his habit to take the role of the one who read and expounded the Scriptures (cf. Acts 17:2). This phrase, ‘as was his custom,’ underscores the paradigmatic quality of this episode, both with regard to his Sabbath practices, and with regard to the content of his proclamation.”¹⁶

Indeed, it is better to take Luke 4:16 as representing *both* Yeshua’s faithful Sabbath observance, *and* how gatherings at the synagogue were one of the most ideal places for Him to present Himself as the Messiah. E. Earle Ellis is keen to remark, “synagogue attendance was expected of every devout Jew. In mind here may be the use of the synagogue service as a place of teaching. The practice was followed also in the post-resurrection mission of the Church. Cf. 4:44; 6:6; 13:10; Jn. 18:20; Act. 17:1f.”¹⁷

While today’s broad Messianic movement undeniably has a Jewish theological and spiritual heritage to honor—especially in terms of the liturgy and order of service to be employed on *Shabbat*—we also have a responsibility to honor the tenor of what Yeshua the Messiah did, in presenting Himself to those at the Nazareth synagogue. As He would say later, as recorded by Luke, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Our service, in worshiping the God of Israel, is to be decisively focused on what the Messiah of Israel has brought about.

¹⁵ John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1:9-20*, Vol 35a (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 195.

¹⁶ Joel B. Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 209.

¹⁷ E. Earle Ellis, *New Century Bible Commentary: Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 97.