

Mark 2:23-28; Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5

“The Son of Man as Lord of the Sabbath”

“And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of *grain*. The Pharisees were saying to Him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And He said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar *the* high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for *anyone* to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?’ Yeshua said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:23-28).

All three of the Synoptic Gospels record a scene of Yeshua the Messiah and His Disciples walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath (**Mark 2:23-28; Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5**),¹ and with Yeshua being criticized for permitting His Disciples to conduct some kind of (traditionally) unauthorized Sabbath activity. While each of the Gospel records incorporates a slightly different account of the events, and as such includes some varied details, in our evaluation of the seventh-day Sabbath from the Apostolic Scriptures, our focus will mainly be on what different commentators and examiners—on Mark, Matthew, and Luke separately—have said about the Messiah’s observance of *Shabbat*.

Did Yeshua promote Sabbath violation? Did the actions of Yeshua convey the intention of the Sabbath institution being abolished in the future? Or, did Yeshua’s views in this scene sit within normative Jewish practice?

Mark 2:23 This scene opens with the narration, “Now it happened on *Shabbat* that *Yeshua* was going through the grain fields; and His disciples began to make their way, plucking the heads of grain” (TLV). While accusations will be principally directed toward Yeshua, as the behavior of His Disciples reflects back on Him as their Teacher, it is mainly the Disciples’ who were actually doing something which could have been constituted as some violation of the Sabbath. The Disciples were traveling on the Sabbath, and as such may have exceeded some of the normative distance allowed for walking (cf. Acts 1:12). But, the issue which actually gains attention is how in walking through grain or wheat fields, the Disciples would be plucking off the heads of grain, rubbing them with their hands and fingers, and then eating them. Gleaning from the fields is something which is actually permitted in the Torah:

“When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain” (Deuteronomy 23:25).

Mark 2:24 Various Pharisees looking at what was taking place, as it appears in most English Bibles, exclaim, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” or “Look! Why are they violating *Shabbat*?” (CJB). The challenge with this rendering, is that the verb *exesti* (ἐξέσται) more properly means “it is allowed, it is in one's power, is

¹ John R. Kohlenberger III, ed., *The NIV Integrated Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 1162.

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possible" (*LS*),² notably lacking the root *nomos* (νόμος) or "law." A much better rendering would be along the lines of: "Look at what they are doing on the sabbath! That is not allowed" (Moffat New Testament), "Look at that! Why should they do what is forbidden on the Sabbath day?" (Phillips New Testament), or "Look, why are they doing what is not permitted on *Shabbat*?" (TLV). Whether or not a specific violation of the Torah or Law of Moses was actually taking place, is something which Christian readers do not often weigh, but Messianic readers do tend to weigh.

Plucking heads of grain in one's hand could have been taken as a kind of harvesting, and Exodus 34:21 does explicitly prohibit harvesting on the Sabbath: "You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; *even* during plowing time and harvest you shall rest." At the same time, the harvesting in view is a major agricultural chore, which the Disciples were not engaging in. More customarily, examiners will reference the thirty-nine classifications of prohibited work in Mishnah, which would include "reaps," "threshes," and "grinds" (*m. Shabbat* 7:2),³ all of which the Disciples could have been accused of doing by rubbing heads of grain with their hands and fingers. William L. Lane properly directs how the Pharisees looking on "raise a question of *halakhah* of what is legally permitted or prohibited."⁴ R.T. France further indicates,

"There is no indication that Jesus either rejected the sabbath law as such, or questioned that the sabbath was intended as a day of cessation from work. But his understanding of what was and was not permissible did not coincide with current interpretation, and yet was asserted with a sovereign assurance which raised sharply the issue of halakhic authority."⁵

It is to be properly recognized that when the accusation was issued, "Why are your disciples picking grain on the Sabbath? They are not supposed to do that!" (Contemporary English Version), that the discussion which will ensue would regard what is, and what is not, permitted to take place on *Shabbat*. That some Jewish authorities from the Second Temple period held to a more strict and rigid view of *Shabbat* than others, is well known. The institution and value of the Sabbath itself, though, is not in question in Mark 2:23-28. As Robert A. Guelich summarizes,

"The Pharisee and rabbinic tradition was...vitaly concerned with delineating what could and could not be done as seen in the listing of the thirty-nine proscribed major works in *m. Šabb.* 7:2 that were later broken down into six sub-categories each and a further list in *m. Beša* 5:2...This specification of proscribed activities reflects their concern to avoid all possibilities of transgressing the sabbath law. Only life-threatening situations or dire personal needs could supersede the sabbath law (*Mek. Exod.* 31:12)."⁶

The actions of Yeshua's Disciples, in plucking heads of grain and eating them on *Shabbat*, will be seen to be rightfully placed within the context of eating food for

² *LS*, 273.

³ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 187.

⁴ Lane, Mark, 115.

Cf. James R. Edwards, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp 93-94; R.T. France, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp 142-143 for a summary of Sabbath issues.

⁵ France, *Mark*, 143.

⁶ Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 1-8:26*, Vol. 34a (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 121.

sustenance. However, it will also be seen that Yeshua's unique authority and position (2:28), which makes Him anything but a normal human teacher or rabbi, is what will ultimately allow both Him and His followers to push some of the Sabbath stipulations in view of the overarching importance of their mission.

Mark 2:25-26 Yeshua makes light of a scene from the Tanach, in order to legitimize the actions of His Disciples in picking heads of grain on the Sabbath:

"And He said to them, 'Haven't you ever read what David did when he was in need, and he and those with him became hungry? How he entered into the house of God when Abiathar was *kohen gadol* [high priest] and ate the showbread, which is permitted only for the *kohanim* [priests] to eat, and gave some even to those who were with him?'" (TLV).

David and his companions were fleeing for their lives, hungry and starved, and the only food they could quickly eat was the consecrated bread of the Tabernacle, intended only for the Levitical priests to eat (Leviticus 24:5-9). This scene is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6:

"Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, 'Why are you alone and no one with you?' David said to Ahimelech the priest, 'The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'" Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found.' The priest answered David and said, 'There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.' David answered the priest and said to him, 'Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels *be holy*?' So the priest gave him consecrated *bread*; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* when it was taken away."

When turning to 1 Samuel 21:1-6 from Mark 2:25, an issue does jump out at readers, as it concerns how Ahimelech is actually noted to be the high priest here, and not Abiathar, who was actually the son of Ahimelech (1 Samuel 22:20). The NIV offers a way around this, with the slight paraphrase, "In the days of Abiathar the high priest." A variety of thoughts have been offered as to why Mark 2:25 references Abiathar and not Ahimelech. Lane notes the view that Abiathar was referenced, and not Ahimelech, because he was a more widely known figure:

"Abiathar was a son of Ahimelech who escaped the massacre of the high priestly family, and who enters the record for the first time a chapter later (1 Sam. 22:20). Because he served as high priest and was better known in association with David than his father, it is commonly assumed a primitive error entered the tradition before it came into Mark's hands or an early marginal gloss which was in error moved into the text. The difficulty was early felt and is reflected in the manuscript tradition....In Ch. 2:26 Mark

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may have inserted the reference to Abiathar to indicate the section of the Samuel scroll in which the incident could be located.”⁷

It cannot go overlooked how the Tanach itself is not entirely clear about either Ahimelech or Abiathar. 1 Samuel 22:20 describes how, “But one son of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David,” but then later in 2 Samuel 8:17 it is stated, “Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar *were* priests, and Seraiah *was* secretary.” Also in 1 Chronicles 18:16 it is described, “and Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar *were* priests, and Shavsha *was* secretary,” with it further recorded in 1 Chronicles 24:6, “Shemaiah, the son of Nethanel the scribe, from the Levites, recorded them in the presence of the king, the princes, Zadok the priest, Ahimelech the son of Abiathar.” James R. Edwards concurs how there is some ancient confusion about Ahimelech and Abiathar:

“Already in the OT Abiathar and Ahimelech appear to be confused. In 1 Sam 22:20 Ahimelech is said to be the son of Achitub and the father of Abiathar, but in 2 Sam 8:17 and 1 Chr 18:16 Zadok is said to be the son of Achitub and Ahimelech the son of Abithar! 1 Chr 24:6 also calls Ahimelech the son of Abiathar. The family genealogy is ostensibly: Achitub, father of Ahimelech, father of Abiathar, father of Ahimelech (1 Chr 24:3, 6, 31). There appear to be two Ahimelechs, grandfather and grandson, with Abiathar between; but, as noted...the second and third members of the line are sometimes reversed. Abiathar is by all accounts the dominant member of the genealogy since he survived the massacre of his father by Doeg and fled to David.”⁸

If there was any confusion in Mark 2:25 referencing Abiathar and not Ahimelech, then it needs to be recognized how John Mark is only passing on a potentially older historical issue from Samuel and Chronicles.⁹

The more significant issue, in referencing how the future King David and his men would eat the Bread of the Presence—which they technically were prohibited from consuming—is how they were not condemned for it. C.E.B. Cranfield states, “the drift of the argument is the fact that scripture does not condemn David for his action shows that the rigidity with which the Pharisees interpreted the ritual law was not in accordance with scripture, and so was not a proper understanding of the Law itself.”¹⁰ If David and his party can eat forbidden bread from the Tabernacle, then what about Yeshua’s followers gleaning from the field on *Shabbat*?

There are likely to be some points of agreement and disagreement that today’s Messianic readers will have with the thoughts of D. Thomas Lancaster, in his 2013 book *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels’ Sabbath Conflicts*:

“The Master admitted that David and his companions did something ‘which is not lawful’ when they took and ate the holy bread. In saying this, he conceded, by way of comparison, that his disciples also did something ‘which is not lawful’ on the Sabbath. David and his men correspond to the disciples. Both parties were hungry and without food. Both parties acquired food by forbidden means. David violated the ritual sanctity

⁷ Lane, *Mark*, pp 115-116.

⁸ Edwards, *Mark*, 95 fn#42.

⁹ Cf. France, *Mark*, 146.

¹⁰ Cranfield, *Mark*, 115.

of the Temple service by taking and eating the bread of the presence. The disciples violated the sanctity of the Sabbath by plucking, husking, and eating grain on the Sabbath day.

“David violated the sanctity of the Temple service because ‘he was hungry’ as were ‘those who were with him.’ Jesus justified David on the basis that ‘he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him’ (Mark 2:25). Jesus reasoned that the ‘need’ and ‘hunger’ of David and his men provided them with adequate reason for violating the ritual sanctity of the Temple service by eating the bread of the presence.”¹¹

Lancaster will go on in his resource and make an appeal to the Rabbinic principle of *Pikku'ach Nefesh* or Regard for Human Life,¹² in that any ritual commandment can be violated in order to preserve human life, hence, what both David and Yeshua's Disciples did was not strictly wrong. Some will balk at picking heads of grain, and rubbing them with one's hands and fingers, as being a violation of Pentateuchal Sabbath instructions, as Lancaster is upholding the thirty-nine classifications of work in the Mishnah by his remarks (m.*Shabbat* 7:2)—stipulations to be ignored, apparently, when severe hunger sets in. It is probably fair to recognize that the Disciples' perceived violation of the Sabbath by some Pharisees looking on, was not a strict violation of the Sabbath, as they were hungry and the principle of *Pikku'ach Nefesh* can indeed apply—and in this case they were gleaning from a field (cf. Deuteronomy 23:25), as opposed to the more serious eating the Bread of the Presence. There are various Christian commentators who would disagree, though, that the preservation of life, via a cessation of hunger, is the issue here.¹³

A number of commentators on Mark think that an appeal to the example of David is instead what needs to be probed, and this is hardly without merit. In the view of Edwards, “David had eaten the consecrated bread as an exception when he and his men were starving. Jesus, however, does not raise the incident in order to plead for a Sabbath exception for his hungry disciples. He cites David's violation of the Torah not as an excuse for his action but as a *precedent*.”¹⁴ He further indicates, “In making the allusion to David, Jesus is inviting comparison between his person and Israel's royal messianic prototype”¹⁵ (cf. Mark 10:47; 12:35-37). Larry W. Hurtado draws out how the incident with David is not normative, but rather was necessary per the needs of the moment, apparently in light of him being the future monarch of Israel. In a similar manner, Yeshua's mission of declaring the good news of His Father's Kingdom can very well override some of the more normative practices witnessed on the Sabbath:

“In the context, David's breach of the religious rules was necessitated by the urgent situation, and Jesus is saying that the urgency of his mission demands that he too must violate religious custom by traveling and foraging even on the Sabbath. The point is that the actions of Jesus and his disciples are closely connected with their mission, and the

¹¹ D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels' Sabbath Conflicts* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2013), pp 25-26.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 26-27.

¹³ Guelich, 123; Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 8:556.

¹⁴ Edwards, *Mark*, 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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analogy with David is one of situation and not exact conduct....This, however, means that the issue boils down to the question of whether in fact Jesus' message and mission came before the observance of such an important commandment as Sabbath."¹⁶

Guelich offers the general thought, "Just as David had the authority and freedom to eat illegally and to give those with him to eat the shewbread illegally, so Jesus had the authority and freedom to permit his disciples who had left all to follow him (Matt 19:27) to eat food gathered illegally on the sabbath."¹⁷ France is more forthright, noting how the association with the future King David's actions, reveal a personal identity on the part of the Messiah, at least on par with one of Ancient Israel's heroes:

"The question is not in any whether the specific action could or could not be declared legitimate; it was rather, as vv. 27-28 will make clear, whether Jesus had the right to override the agreed conventions, in his capacity as κύριός τοῦ σαββάτου [*Kurios tou sabbatou*]. The focus of the scriptural allusion is not therefore so much on what David did, as on the fact that it was David who did it, and that Scripture records his act, illegal as it was, with apparent approval. The logic of Jesus' argument therefore implies a covert claim to a personal authority at least as great as that of David."¹⁸

Perhaps indeed the Disciples had a bout of hunger in their Sabbath activities, and the Rabbinic principle of *Pikku'ach Nefesh* or Regard for Human Life would permit their plucking heads of grain. But Yeshua did not tell His detractors, "They were famished and needed to eat," which might have immediately shut them down. Instead, Yeshua associated the activities of His party with the activities of a prior monarch of Israel, who ate the Bread of the Presence without condemnation. **Yeshua, as the Messiah, King, and Savior of Israel was out to perform even more important actions than David!**

Mark 2:27 One of the most frequently-quoted statements by people across the theological spectrum, regarding the Messiah's approach to the institution of the Sabbath, is His famed word, "**The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath**" (NASU). A frequent conclusion drawn, recognized by Edwards, is how "2:27 clarifies the relationship between human life and the Sabbath: people are not made for Sabbath rules, but the Sabbath was instituted to bless humanity and enhance its well-being."¹⁹ It tends to be further thought that by these words, the Lord was making an appeal to the Creation function of *Shabbat* (Genesis 2:1-3), and how the Sabbath rest is ultimately to be liberating to people, not restrictive. And, it is witnessed how there are similar statements phrased in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Talmud:

"But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation" (2 Maccabees 5:19).

"And you said that you would make a man for this world as a guardian over your works that it should be known that he was not created for the world, but the world for him" (2 *Baruch* 14:17).²⁰

¹⁶ Hurtado, pp 48-49.

¹⁷ Guelich, 123.

¹⁸ France, *Mark*, 145.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Mark*, 96.

²⁰ A.F.J. Klijn, trans., "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1, 626.

"R. Yosé b. R. Judah says, "Only you shall keep my Sabbaths" (Exo. 31:13)— might one suppose that this is under all circumstances? Scripture says, "...only...", meaning, there can be exceptions.' R. Jonathan b. Joseph says, "For it is holy to you"—it is given into your hands, you are not committed into its hands" (b. *Yoma* 85b).²¹

The Sabbath, as great an important as a gift that it is, as the NLT paraphrases it, "was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath." Are there exceptions to the rules and stipulations of the Sabbath or *Shabbat*, be those rules found in the traditional Jewish *halachah*, or even in the Mosaic Torah proper? **Yes.**

Much discussion can surround the assertion of v. 25, *to sabbaton dia ton anthrōpon egeneto* (τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο). There was certainly some difference of opinion in Second Temple Judaism, regarding whether the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* was only intended for Israel proper (*Jubilees* 2:19-21, 31), or is something which was actually intended for all of humanity (Philo *On the Decalogue* 97-98; *On the Creation* 89). There is not always agreement within our contemporary Messianic movement on this, either. Still, there are many within our faith community who do favor that Mark 2:27 be rendered as "*Shabbat* was made for mankind, not mankind for *Shabbat*" (CJB), with the Sabbath being an inclusive, rather than an exclusive, institution, for all people. Even with a number of limitations (see previous discussions on Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), Lancaster is broadly favorable toward non-Jewish Believers keeping the seventh-day Sabbath along with Jewish Believers:

"...When Jesus said, 'The Sabbath was made for man,' his statement includes all human beings, not just Jews. This is not the same as saying that all human beings are obligated to keep the Sabbath in the same manner as the Jewish people. It only means that the Sabbath is God's gift to human beings. It is his blessed and holy day. He did not institute the Sabbath at Mount Sinai; he instituted it immediately after the sixth day of creation, which is to say, immediately after the creation of the first human beings.

"A non-Jewish disciple of Jesus does not have the same covenantal obligation to keep the Sabbath that a Jewish person has. Nevertheless, he has the privilege of enjoying the Sabbath, celebrating the Sabbath, and evening keeping it to whatever extent he is able. According to our teacher Jesus, the Sabbath was made for everyone."²²

In this writer's view, while *Shabbat* should be viewed as a Creation ordinance which affects all human beings, the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish people with their Sabbath-keeping—is likely going to be more in terms of how much or how little of Jewish tradition they employ in their observance of it. Not all people, for example, may make the effort of having a *Shabbat* dinner on Friday evening, as beneficial and edifying a custom that may be. Likewise, to a Jewish person, *Shabbat* is a part of his or her ethnic

²¹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

²² Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 35.

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and cultural heritage, whereas a non-Jewish follower of Israel's Messiah has only inherited *Shabbat* as a part of his or her spiritual heritage in Israel's Scriptures.

While many of today's Messianic people might be a bit perturbed that "The Sabbath was made for mankind, and not mankind for the Sabbath" does not appear in more of the English Bibles with which they are familiar—it cannot go unnoticed how versions employing a philosophy of inclusive language, actually going back to the 1989 New Revised Standard Version, have gone even further than this:

- "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (NRSV).
- "The sabbath was made for humans...not humans for the sabbath" (Kingdom New Testament).
- "The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath" (Common English Bible).

Indeed, Mark 2:27 should be rendered along the lines of something like, "**The Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath**" (PME).

But what does the emphasis upon the human beings who have received the institution of the Sabbath mean for the conflict of Yeshua's Disciples plucking heads of grain to avert hunger? Guelich draws the conclusion that "either we have a saying that affirms the human freedom to set aside the sabbath law without any qualifications, or we have a saying that affirms the value of the sabbath as God's provision at creation but as a benefit for 'man,' the human creature, with no prescribed or proscribed guidelines for sabbath conflict."²³

Those Messiah followers who want to view the Sabbath as an institution for the benefit of all humankind, recognize its potential to provide a weekly period of rest and refreshment for all—and hence would not be too keen to just cast aside the Torah and Tanach stipulations for what it means to rest from one's labor, and abstain from commerce. They would **not** see various "prescribed or proscribed guidelines" for the Sabbath as being incompatible with the benefits of rest and refreshment. *Shabbat* is to be an institution to be honored with the example of the ministry and activities of Yeshua the Messiah in focus. This would mean that the application of various Sabbath injunctions—be they Biblical or extra-Biblical—does need to fall within the purview of what the Messiah would do.

Mark 2:28 The Markan scene of Yeshua's Disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath ends with the Messiah asserting, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of *Shabbat*" (TLV). Mark 2:28 is most often interpreted in association with the Daniel 7:13-14²⁴ theophany of "One like a Son of Man" being given full dominion and power, sitting alongside the LORD God (YHWH) Himself, and receiving the same worship and honor. In Yeshua the Messiah asserting such a status as the Son of Man, He has sovereignty over

²³ Guelich, 125.

²⁴ "I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:13-14).

the Sabbath, similar to how earlier in Mark 2:10 readers encounter, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..."

What Yeshua's sovereignty over the Sabbath, as the Son of Man, would mean, is that **He gets to determine what can and cannot be done on *Shabbat***. Lane indicates, "Reflection on Jesus' act and word, through which he established the true intention of the Sabbath and exposed the weakness of a human system of fencing the Law with restrictions, revealed his sovereign authority over the Sabbath itself."²⁵ Hurtado makes the astute point, "by virtue of Jesus' authority and the urgency of his mission, he is presented as free to judge how to employ even the Sabbath day in the pursuit of his task, in which he heralds the arrival of the ultimate 'good' for humanity, symbolized in the gift of the Sabbath rest."²⁶ Contrasting this may be the thought of R. Alan Cole, "[he] claims to have the absolute right to overrule the sabbath."²⁷

Something that need not be overlooked at all, when it comes to people considering the supreme example of the Messiah in keeping the Sabbath—is how in the Tanach or Old Testament, *Shabbat* was an institution regarded as being "of/to the Lord" or YHWH (Exodus 16:25; 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; cf. Exodus 31:13; Leviticus 19:3, 30; Ezekiel 20:12-13). But here, it is Yeshua who is the Lord of the Sabbath. France stresses how Yeshua being Lord of the Sabbath has important Christological dimensions to it, obviously pointing in the direction of Yeshua being Divine:

"Here...the concept represents yet another escalation in the unique ἐξουσία [*exousia*] exercised by Jesus: he is being progressively revealed as κύριος [*Kurios*] in his teaching and action, in relation to spiritual powers and physical illness, in the declaration of the forgiveness of sins, and...even...in relation to that most sacred of divine institutions, the sabbath. The christological stakes could hardly be pitched higher than this."²⁸

Not all examiners are, in fact, agreed that "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" involves the Messiah's Divine authority to determine what is, and what is proper to do on *Shabbat*. An alternative approach sometimes witnessed is that the terminology "son of man" is not to be taken as a Divine title or Messianic title, but instead via a background of the Aramaic *bar nasha* (בַּר נֶשָׂא) is more akin to the generic "human being." Hence, Mark 2:28 would instead mean that "the human being is lord/master even of the Sabbath" in the sense that people do what they need to do on the Sabbath.²⁹ Cranfield explains one of the major reasons for why this alternative approach is adopted by various examiners, in how "If the term [Son of Man] was a recognizable messianic title...would Jesus have used it thus openly at this stage of his ministry and in conversation with his opponents...?"³⁰ Would the Son of Man be a title used early on in the Messiah's ministry? Some do not think so. But the presence of the title Son of Man earlier in Mark 2:10 should cause many to disregard the "human being" view of Mark 2:28.

²⁵ Lane, *Mark*, 120.

²⁶ Hurtado, 49.

²⁷ R. Alan Cole, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 130.

²⁸ France, *Mark*, 148.

²⁹ This view is broadly represented by Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, pp 37-41.

³⁰ Cranfield, *Mark*, 118.

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Although many commentators on Mark rightly hold to Mark 2:28 pertaining to Yeshua the Messiah as the Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath, having ultimate authority on what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath—application of this can, for sure, be taken beyond the Messiah having a final authority on Sabbath *halachah* and praxis. C.E. Graham Swift is one who thinks, “The Sabbath has been given for man’s benefit. Therefore the Representative Man may decide how it can best be used. Under His influence it has been changed to another day of the week and made available to all nations. We disregard it to our loss and peril.”³¹ Messianic people who affirm the Messiah’s supremacy over all things—as Lord no less—would agree with Swift with the Messiah having final authority over how the Sabbath can best be used, as well as how those people—Jewish or non-Jewish—who disregard the Sabbath, do so to their own loss of blessing and revitalization. But whether Yeshua actually had an intention on changing the Sabbath to another day of the week, is something to be evaluated from further passages to be sure (i.e., Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:1; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Ben Witherington III, who certainly is one who does not believe in the post-resurrection era validity of either the seventh-day Sabbath or the Torah, is notably ambiguous in his conclusion, “Jesus understands the original intention of the Sabbath and is bringing that into focus—providing true rest and restoration for his disciples. He has the power and authority to declare that the old ways are no longer applicable in view of the inbreaking eschatological action of God.”³² Reasonable Messianic people, who once again would affirm the Messiah’s supremacy over all things, would recognize that He has the “authority to declare that the old ways are no longer applicable in view of the inbreaking eschatological action of God.” But, do such “old ways” involve the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath itself, *or* are they to just be limited to how *Shabbat* is observed in light of His Kingdom proclamation?

Taking a rather Gospel-critical approach to the passage of Mark 2:23-28, Guelich, not quite knowing what to believe, can only conclude, “Neither Jesus’ nor his disciples’ lifestyle, as best we can tell, indicate a penchant for abrogating the Law nor does the sabbath practice of the primitive Church, limited though our knowledge be, indicate a cavalier approach to the sabbath...Consequently, we do not have any basis for considering Jesus to have annulled in principle the sabbath law for himself or his followers.”³³ We should welcome such a conclusion, because throughout the scene of His Disciples picking the heads of grain, the issue was actually Sabbath *halachah*. There was no issue as to the ongoing importance or validity of the Sabbath, given Yeshua’s assertion about *Shabbat* being a gift for humanity (v. 27).

Edwards usefully mentions some of the broader issues present in Mark 2:27-28, which today’s Messiah-centric and Messiah-focused Messianic people should appreciate. He details how throughout Christian history, there needs to be a balance sought between the place of God’s Law, and the will of God as demonstrated in the example of Yeshua. Certainly in Protestant history, various piety movements which have emphasized the

³¹ C.E. Graham Swift, “Mark,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 858.

³² Witherington, *Mark*, 131.

³³ Guelich, 127.

importance of what they, at least consider, the so-called “moral law” of the Torah, and a “Sunday Sabbath,” have had to balance these factors together:

“2:27-28 preserve an important clue concerning the relationship of Jesus and the Torah, gospel and law, which have long been a point of controversy in Christianity. The extremes of both legalism and antinomianism are avoided. The law is not here regarded as an autonomous revelation, which in legalism tends to replace the person of God. Nor is Jesus a free agent who abrogates the Sabbath or the moral order or the revealed will of God, as in antinomianism. Rather, the sayings of vv. 27-28 teach that the righteous purpose of God as manifested in the Torah can be recovered and fulfilled only in relation to Jesus, who is its Lord.”³⁴

Today’s Messianic people, who believe in the post-resurrection era validity of the seventh-day Sabbath, can take a cue from this: as beneficial and rewarding as keeping *Shabbat* might be, how valuable is our Sabbath keeping, if it is not remembered in light of the ministry and service of Yeshua the Messiah? He is the One who performed important and critical actions on the Sabbath, precisely because He was the King of Israel! And so, in spite of the varied views and historical probing seen in his *Word Biblical Commentary* volume, the overall conclusion presented by Guelich, is one with which many of us would agree:

“[I]n the light of Gen 1 and the order of creation, Jesus claimed the authority to do God’s work of the age of salvation (see 3:1-5) and to provide for his own (2:23-26) in conjunction with his ministry even when such actions came into conflict with the sabbath law. He was not annulling the sabbath law in principle, rather he was interpreting the sabbath law in the light of his ministry.”³⁵

Each of us who has experienced the goodness of Yeshua’s salvation, believes that we need to make Yeshua the Lord or Master of our lives. When we can recognize Him as being the Lord of the Sabbath or *Shabbat*, then what we do on the seventh day is to be in alignment with what He would do. Far from such actions being seen as a nullification of the Sabbath, they are to be seen as a reinforcement of it as a venue to provide men and women, all human beings, with a specific day when they can consider how well they are accomplishing the mission of the Creator God in the Earth!

“At that time Yeshua went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.’ But He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE’ [Hosea

³⁴ Edwards, *Mark*, 97.

³⁵ Guelich, 129.

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6:6], you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'" (Matthew 12:1-8).

Matthew 12:1 Matthew's record of Yeshua's disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath does differ in some of its details from Mark 2:23-28, which many examiners are agreed was employed by Matthew for the composition of his Gospel.³⁶ While some might choose to see some of the difference of detail as being a matter of Matthew disagreeing with Mark, others might instead choose to recognize that Matthew needed to emphasize some further aspects of why the Messiah was permissive with His Disciples plucking heads of grain on *Shabbat*.

Matthew's record of this scene begins: "One *Shabbat* during that time, Yeshua was walking through some wheat fields. His *talmidim* were hungry, so they began picking heads of grain and eating them" (CJB). The poor of Ancient Israel were permitted to glean from the fields, provided they did not harvest with any kind of tool like a sickle (Deuteronomy 23:25; cf. Leviticus 19:9; 23:22), something which is witnessed in Ruth 2:2-3.³⁷ The Disciples were not doing anything too irregular. But, problems obviously erupted because it was the Sabbath when they did this.

Referencing the institution of *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת), David H. Stern summarizes the following in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*:

"The Hebrew word has entered English as 'Sabbath.' The biblical concept of a weekly day for resting from workaday purposes has no close parallel in the ancient world. The fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11, Deuteronomy 5:12-14) connects *Shabbat* with the fact that God rested after the six days of creation (Genesis 2:1-3); makes it a day of equality in which all, high and low alike, are entitled to rest; and sets it aside as a day which is holy, on which God is to be honored."³⁸

Far too frequently, in scenes of conflict between Yeshua the Messiah and various Jewish religious leaders, which take place on the Sabbath, Christian readers have not considered how important an institution *Shabbat* actually was to ancient Jews. Furthermore, there are various negative stereotypes held by many Christian people toward the seventh-day Sabbath, as though it was to be a time of burdensome undue legalism. Among commentators, M. Eugene Boring actually sets a positive tone for how the institution of the Sabbath, and how this scene, should be approached:

"It is misleading, superficial, and simplistic to attempt to understand the text in terms of a conflict between Jewish legalism and Jesus' or the church's freedom from the Law. To understand this text, one must first gain some sense of the meaning of the sabbath in first-century Jewish life. The sabbath not only was commanded by God as part of the Decalogue, the fundamental covenant Law (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15, in both cases

³⁶ Consult the entries for the Gospels of Mark and Matthew in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

³⁷ "And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, 'Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.' And she said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech" (Ruth 2:2-3).

³⁸ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 44.

expressed as the most elaborate of the Ten Commandments), but also was observed and blessed by God at the beginning of creation (Gen 2:2-3). The sabbath had served for centuries as the distinctive mark of the people of God that separated them out from Gentiles and presented a constant testimony to their faith in the one God. Sabbath keeping was not superficial or casual; in times of duress, faithful Israelites would die rather than break God's law by profaning the sabbath. To observant Jews, the sabbath was a joy, not a burden. The sabbath was a festive day of rest from labor, a day of eating and drinking on which it was forbidden to fast. From the beginning (Deut 5:14-15) an element of social justice had been expressed in the law, for servants and slaves received a much-needed rest of which they could not be deprived, and the poor and hungry joined in the eating and drinking."³⁹

Customarily, various Christian examiners (unlike various lay readers) will affirm that Yeshua was widely positive to the Biblical Sabbath, but that He was widely negative toward the extra-Biblical regulations and traditional Jewish *halachah*. Leon Morris is reflective of this approach, stating, "It was not that [Jesus] thought the Pharisees were too rigorous in their Sabbath observance and was trying to relieve a grievous burden. Rather, he held that they had the wrong idea of the Sabbath altogether."⁴⁰ Morris does conclude that there was likely an issue of genuine hunger, with the Disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, which the Pharisaical authorities present were apparently unable to detect or discern.

Matthew 12:2 A standard rendering, which will appear in a majority of English Bibles, states, "But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath' (RSV). The CJB has, "Your *talmidim* are violating *Shabbat!*" (CJB).

A proper rendering of the verb *exesti* (ἔξεστι), which notably lacks the root (νόμος), is something which needs to be considered, especially given the fact of whether or not a violation of the Torah or Pentateuch proper has been committed by the Disciples, or instead some infringement on *halachic* orthopraxy. In his commentary on Matthew, noting the verb *exestin* (ἔξεστιν), R.T. France indicates several ways it can be translated in English, and poses the question as to whether or not any Tanach or Old Testament commandments were actually being transgressed:

"A key term in this section is the impersonal verb *exestin*, 'it is permissible, lawful,' which occurs in vv. 2 ('ought'), 4 ('lawful'), and 10 and 12 ('permissible'). The OT commandment was clear, that no work was to be done. But what is 'work'? OT case law and narrative precedent provided a few guidelines, but it was a major concern of the scribes to work out more specific rules so that everyone could be sure what was and was not permissible."⁴¹

³⁹ M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al. *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 277.

Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp 350-354 includes some further, useful discussion.

⁴⁰ Leon Morris, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp 299-300.

⁴¹ R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 455.

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With *exestin* properly defined as “it is permissible,” some better renderings of Matthew 12:2 include:

- “Look at your disciples, they are doing what is not allowed on the sabbath” (Moffat New Testament).
- “See, your disciples are doing what it is forbidden to do on the sabbath” (*Lattimore*).
- “Look here! Your disciples are doing something that’s not permitted on the Sabbath!” (Kingdom New Testament).
- “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not permitted on *Shabbat*” (TLV).
- “Look, your disciples are doing something which ought not to be done on the sabbath” (France, *NICNT*).⁴²

It cannot go overlooked how a rather general resource like the 2005 *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, usefully guides, “To a Pharisee, ‘what is lawful’ could have referred either to a Scriptural command or to a rabbi’s interpretation of that command...The disciples could have been cited for any of several rabbinic taboos.”⁴³ Michael J. Wilkins observes how there was an emergent oral tradition present in Second Temple Judaism, which hence defined various forms of “work” prohibited on the Sabbath, and how in this scene it is Yeshua the Messiah who intends to provide a more authoritative interpretation of the Sabbath instructions:

“[T]he mandate not to work was understood differently by sectarian groups within Israel, so it had to be interpreted for the people. With their emergent oral tradition, the Pharisees developed an extensive set of laws to guide the people so that they would not violate the Sabbath...Like Jesus’ interpretation of the Law and the Prophets in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:17-47), he gives a stunning authoritative pronouncement about the Sabbath and takes us to the heart of God’s intent and motive in giving that commandment...Jesus has come to bring rest to those who take on his yoke of discipleship (cf. 11:28-30), the kind of true rest to which the Sabbath rest was designed to point.”⁴⁴

While it is fair to take the criticism of Matthew 12:2 in the direction of the Disciples violating some Sabbath *halachah*, Donald A. Hagner is unsure of this, pointing out, “Jesus and the disciples transgress at least the tradition of the Pharisees, and technically...it is possible to regard their activity as a violation of the Torah commandment itself.”⁴⁵ Stern approaches things from another angle, remarking, “At issue behind this seemingly minor matter is whether the Pharisaic tradition—which evolved into what rabbinic Judaism calls the Oral *Torah*, later committed to writing in the Mishna, Gemara and other works—is God’s revelation to man and binding on all Jews.”⁴⁶

Plucking heads of grain could have been in violation of the thirty-nine work prohibitions, traditionally seen in the Mishnah (m.*Shabbat* 7:2). However, it should not go

⁴² France, *Matthew*, 453.

⁴³ Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1579.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Wilkins, *NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 438.

⁴⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Vol 33a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 329.

⁴⁶ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 44.

overlooked how a late opinion, recorded in the Talmud, does allow for the picking of grain with the fingers on the Sabbath:

“And he may break it with his hand and eat of it, on condition that he not break it with a utensil. And he may crush it and eat it, on condition that he not crush a large quantity with a utensil,” the words of R. Judah. And sages say, **‘He may crush it with his fingertips and eat it, on condition that he not crush a large quantity by hand, as one would do on ordinary days.’** And so is the rule for mint, rue, and all other spices” (b.*Shabbat* 128a).⁴⁷

Matthew 12:3-4 Yeshua the Messiah references the scene of David and his party eating the showbread of the Tabernacle in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, as Matthew details, “Haven’t you read what David did when he became hungry, and those with him? How he entered into the house of God, and they ate the showbread, which was not permitted [*ouk exon, οὐκ ἐξόν*] for him to eat, nor for those with him, but only for the *kohanim*” (TLV). In the Torah, only the priests were permitted to eat the Bread of the Presence (Exodus 25:30; Leviticus 24:5-9), yet the future King David was excused from violating a Torah prohibition, in order to stave off the hunger of his men—and they were notably not condemned for it.

In his commentary on Matthew, D.A. Carson deliberates over not only whether the Disciples broke any formal, Biblical Sabbath commandment, but he even raises the issue of the Messiah calling into question the place of the Torah or Law itself in this scene:

“It is not...clear how they were breaking any OT law, where commandments about the Sabbath were aimed primarily at regular work. The disciples were not farmers trying to do some illicit work, but they were itinerant preachers casually picking some heads of grain. Indeed, apart from Halakic interpretations, it is not at all obvious that any commandment of Scripture was being broken. It seems, then, that Jesus used the David incident not merely to question the Pharisees’ view of the Sabbath, for the David incident was not directly relevant. Rather he was questioning their approach to the law itself.”⁴⁸

Carson appropriately indicates how the Disciples were just casually picking heads of grain on *Shabbat*, and so it would be a bit overbearing to insist that Biblical Sabbath restrictions were being intentionally transgressed. At the same time, Carson is well known for believing that God’s Torah has been abolished for the post-resurrection era, so it is hardly a surprise that he would use this scene in Matthew to conclude that Yeshua is calling into question the place of the Mosaic Torah with His arrival.

Hagner has a slightly different approach of what has transpired in here in Matthew’s record, as he actually thinks, “The OT law was thus violated in this special instance [of David], and this analogy is at least a tacit admission that in a sense the disciples’ activity was not consistent with the sabbath commandment.”⁴⁹ He takes the reference to David and his party being allowed to eat the showbread, although they were technically forbidden, as being a case indicator of Yeshua the Greater Son of David permitting His followers various allowances in terms of their Sabbath observance. Hagner states, “If

⁴⁷ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

⁴⁸ D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al. *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:281.

⁴⁹ Hagner, *Matthew*, 33a:329.

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David and his men were allowed to transgress the letter of the law, how much more so was such a transgression allowed in the case of Jesus, the greater Son of David, and his disciples.”⁵⁰

It is hardly irrelevant that the example of the future King David be invoked, as Yeshua the Messianic King does have important things to do. Whether the Disciples actually violated formal, Biblical Sabbath instructions can be disputed; what cannot be disputed is that the Messiah has an authority and significance which reaches beyond a figure like King David. France stresses, “In [Matthew] 22:41-45 Jesus will argue that the Messiah is more than just a son of David, and that claim is applied in a veiled form to establish his special authority here.”⁵¹ The perspective of Boring is most appropriate to consider: “Precisely as in the Sermon on the Mount, the Torah is affirmed, but it is transcended by the authority of the one who speaks.”⁵² Yeshua and His Disciples, in their function as heralds of the Messianic Kingdom, have things to do which are much more important than observing small—and what are ultimately extra-Biblical—Sabbath stipulations. And the Torah itself recognizes that there are functions to be conducted which can be, actually, more important than various Sabbath injunctions.

Matthew 12:5 Yeshua asks the Pharisees present a probing question about their approach to the Sabbath: “Or haven't you read in the *Torah* that on *Shabbat* the *cohanim* profane *Shabbat* and yet are blameless?” (CJB). While it is more common to see a rendering along the lines of “break the Sabbath” (NASU) for *to sabbaton bebēlousin* (τὸ σάββατον βεβηλοῦσιν), the verb *bebēloō* (βεβηλόω) can more fully mean, “**to cause someth. highly revered to become identified with the commonplace, violate sanctity, desecrate, profane**” (BDAG),⁵³ with “profane the sabbath” (RSV) what is actually intended.

The Torah certainly specified that there were to be various sacrifices offered on the Sabbath (Numbers 28:9-10), and with it a changing of the showbread (Leviticus 24:5-9). That the Levitical priests or *kohanim* were not considered guilty of violating the Sabbath, in doing this work, is clearly an issue of the Torah requiring such work to take place on *Shabbat*, and with it a necessary prioritization of Torah instructions.

By invoking the Levitical priests who would work on the Sabbath in the Tabernacle/Temple, the activities of Yeshua and His Disciples are to be considered quantitatively similar. Wilkins suggests, “Using typical rabbinic logic, Jesus emphasizes that if the guardians of the temple were allowed to violate the Sabbath for the greater good of conducting the priestly rituals, how much more should Jesus and his disciples be considered guiltless when doing the work of God given to them.”⁵⁴ Morris is right to recognize that the activity which the Levitical priests were to perform on the Sabbath should have served as an appropriate prompt for any of Yeshua’s detractors to reconsider some of their approach to their customary Sabbath prohibitions:

“That the priests performed work on the Sabbath—every Sabbath—should give cause for those who revered Scripture to think hard about what God meant for the Sabbath

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ France, *Matthew*, 459.

⁵² Boring, in *NIB*, 8:280.

⁵³ *BDAG*, 173.

⁵⁴ Wilkins, 440.

to be and what people should do to keep it holy. They had too easily accepted views that made the Sabbath a burden and had overlooked the fact that Scripture did not fit into their pattern...[C]ertainly the physical work they performed was not inconsiderable and far exceeded the small labors of the disciples. But everyone agrees that the priests are guiltless."⁵⁵

We do need to remind ourselves that much of the traditional and customary Sabbath *halachah* specified many things which were legitimately to be regarded as laborious work, especially in terms of commercial enterprise. Yeshua and His Disciples, however, in heralds of the Kingdom of God, were performing activities to be classified along the lines of David and his men requiring sustenance (vs. 3-4), and the priests in the Tabernacle/Temple performing critical duties.

Matthew 12:6 Yeshua asserts to those who would criticize what is being witnessed here, "But I tell you that something greater than the Temple is here" (TLV). What is the "something greater than the Temple" to be concluded as being? Is this the Messiah? Is it the imperative of operating via mercy (v. 7)? Is it the arrival of the Messianic reign, and the interjection of new dynamics onto the scene of salvation history? It cannot go overlooked how some have thought that the fulfillment—and in their logic, thus the abolishment, of the Sabbath—is what is intended.⁵⁶ And, it also cannot go overlooked how today's Messianic people, who have favorable view to the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat* for the post-resurrection era, have at times been confused about Yeshua's statement. The words of D. Thomas Lancaster, in his 2013 book *The Sabbath Breaker*, probably do not aid very much in this regard:

"Christian interpretations generally prefer to see in Jesus' words that he himself is 'something greater than the temple.' Accordingly, the reasoning would stutter along as follows: David violated the sanctity of the Temple because he was greater than the Temple service. The Temple service is greater than the Sabbath, and Jesus is greater than all of them. Therefore, his disciples may violate the Sabbath with impunity because Jesus, who is greater than the Sabbath, allows them to do so."⁵⁷

Boring interjects the important factor: "Jesus as authoritative Son of David and Son of Man is the fulcrum of the argument, not commonsense humanitarianism versus Jewish legalism."⁵⁸ Lancaster actually raises the disturbing thought that Yeshua the Messiah, in His person and salvation activity, might be less important than the institution of the Sabbath. More Messianic people than not, however, will be prone to correctly conclude that "something greater than the Temple" is representative of what the Messiah has brought onto the scene.

The adjective *meizon* (μείζον) is actually in the neuter gender, so the "something greater" cannot be taken as exclusively being the Messiah Himself. Wilkins indicates, "The following comments that focus on Jesus' Christological status seem to indicate that 'greater' refers to Jesus himself, but focuses on the quality of superior greatness in his ministry more than his personal identity."⁵⁹ Morris also says, "We should understand this

⁵⁵ Morris, *Matthew*, pp 302-303.

⁵⁶ Cf. Carson, in *EXP*, 8:282.

⁵⁷ Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, pp 27-28.

⁵⁸ Boring, in *NIB*, 8:278.

⁵⁹ Wilkins, 441.

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to refer to the nature of the service and the person of Jesus as one sent to bring in the kingdom."⁶⁰ That Yeshua the Messiah, and what He is inaugurating, is more significant than the Temple and the Sabbath should not be disputed by Messiah-centric people. But does the activity of Yeshua the Messiah nullify the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* for God's people? John Nolland concludes that while Yeshua has the authority to determine what might and what might not be permissible infringements on the prohibition to not work on the Sabbath, this does not at all have to constitute a complete dismissal of the institution:

"We need to keep the statement here in close connection with the guiding thread throughout this account: the account is about justified violation of the normal non-work requirement of the sabbath. What Matthew asserts is that Jesus is of such importance that he can arbitrate as to which are the justified violations of the non-work requirement of the sabbath. Given Matthew's favourable attitude to the Law, the point cannot be that Jesus' presence obviates the need to keep the sabbath."⁶¹

Are Yeshua the Messiah and His work more important than the Temple service and the seventh-day Sabbath? Yes. Does this result in a weekly day of rest such as *Shabbat* being abolished? No. The issue in view is not over the institution of the Sabbath, but rather the application of what it means to work on the Sabbath (vs. 1-2).

Matthew 12:7 In Matthew's record, Yeshua directs His detractors to the Tanach, asserting, "And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (RSV). The Messiah appeals to Hosea 6:6, "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings," with the Hebrew *chesed* (חֶסֶד) rendered in the Greek LXX as *eleos* (ἔλεος). This is notably not the first time Yeshua has employed Hosea 6:6 in the Gospel of Matthew, as it is seen earlier in Matthew 9:12-13:

"But when Yeshua heard *this*, He said, 'It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: "I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE," for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

The first reaction of the Pharisees, who were criticizing Yeshua's Disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath, was not one of mercy or consideration for the specific circumstances; it was one of condemnation. Yeshua's detractors did not prioritize the commandments of the Torah, and so the Messiah asserted that something bigger than the Sabbath, bigger than the Temple, was at work (v. 7). In Hagner's estimation,

"[T]he quotation [of Hosea 6:6] defends his tolerance of the disciples' plucking and eating grain on the sabbath...The point here...is that stringency of law observance must give way to the priority of the good news of the kingdom, which is aimed at human need and thus too the need of those who labor on behalf of the kingdom."⁶²

France adds the further thought, "to call the disciples 'guiltless' also suggests that the Pharisaic interpretation of the sabbath law was in itself wrong."⁶³ Yet, we should

⁶⁰ Morris, *Matthew*, 303; cf. France, *Matthew*, 461 for a similar perspective, one which is specified as "the new principle of God's relationship with his people which will result from Jesus' ministry."

⁶¹ John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp 484-485.

⁶² Hagner, *Matthew*, 33a:330.

⁶³ France, *Matthew*, 462.

choose to be tempered in concluding that Yeshua thought that *all* Pharisaical applications of Torah Sabbath restrictions were wrong. In the instance of the Disciples plucking heads of grain, Yeshua very clearly thought that His Pharisaical detractors were in error.

Matthew 12:8 Matthew's record of the Disciples plucking heads of grain on *Shabbat*, ends with the firm assertion by Yeshua, "For the Son of Man is sovereign over the Sabbath" (NEB). The employment of the title Son of Man, is seemingly concurrent with the Daniel 7:13-14 theophany, with the figure of the Son of Man seated next to the Ancient of Days, and to whom the entire Creation must serve and revere. Yeshua the Messiah, being *Kurios tou Sabbatou* (κύριος τοῦ σαββάτου) or "Lord of the Sabbath," is surely an indication of sovereignty.

But is Divine sovereignty over the Sabbath to be taken as a challenge to the institution of the Sabbath? Carson, who is not favorable to the continuance of the seventh-day Sabbath, is one who says, "the Son of Man [is] in a position to handle the Sabbath law any way he wills, or to supersede it in the same way that the temple requirements superseded the normal Sabbath restrictions."⁶⁴ Hagner's approach is one today's Messianic people are probably going to be in more alignment with, as he emphasizes Yeshua as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah, and that the substance of the Sabbath is to be found in the Kingdom inaugurated by His work:

"Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of the Torah. Thus the demands of the sabbath commandment, however they be construed, must give way to the presence and purpose of Jesus...The Son of Man is with his people as sovereign Lord and messianic king and acts as the final and infallible interpreter of the will of God as expressed in Torah and sabbath commandment. The rest and rejoicing symbolized by the sabbath find fulfillment in the kingdom brought by Jesus."⁶⁵

Wilkins, noting a connection between the previous emphasis of Matthew 11:25-30,⁶⁶ and focusing on the fulfillment that Yeshua brings to the Torah and Prophets, presents a conclusion which is probably consistent with how most of today's Messianic people approach Yeshua and His honoring of the Sabbath:

"[T]he Sabbath law has been fulfilled in the rest brought by Jesus' yoke of discipleship (11:25-30). The messianic Son of Man has the authority to give the true interpretation of the law (5:17-48), including the role of the Sabbath....Jesus does not challenge the Sabbath law itself but the prevailing interpretation of it."⁶⁷

Beyond this, the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is an institution in the Tanach notably designated with the pronoun "My" (Leviticus 19:3, 30; Isaiah 56:4), or stated to be something to/for the LORD or YHWH (Exodus 16:23; 20:10; 35:2). Yeshua being "Lord of *Shabbat*" (TLV) as the Son of Man, necessarily points readers in the direction of a high

⁶⁴ Carson, in *EXP*, 8:283.

⁶⁵ Hagner, *Matthew*, 33a:330, 331.

⁶⁶ "At that time Yeshua said, 'I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS [Jeremiah 6:16]. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light'" (Matthew 11:25-30).

⁶⁷ Wilkins, 441.

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Christology. France astutely indicates, "to speak of an individual human being as such is to make the most extraordinary claim to an authority on a part with that of God himself."⁶⁸

"Now it happened that He was passing through *some* grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating *the grain*. But some of the Pharisees said, 'Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' And Yeshua answering them said, 'Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?' And He was saying to them, 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'" (Luke 6:1-5).

Luke 6:1 The Gospel of Luke, notably volume I in a two-volume series along with the Book of Acts (Acts 1:1-2), possibly incorporated information written previously in the Gospel of Mark, and perhaps also the Gospel of Matthew, in order to present a streamlined record of the ministry of Yeshua the Messiah,⁶⁹ and later the First Century *ekklēsia*. Luke's record of Yeshua's Disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath is thought by some to be derived from Mark 2:23-28 (previously addressed).⁷⁰ Luke 6:1-5 includes a number of different details and emphases, although these are hardly contradictory to Mark 2:23-28 and Matthew 12:1-8.

The scene opens with the word, "Now during *Shabbat*, Yeshua was passing through grain fields; and His disciples were picking and eating heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands" (TLV). What is the orientation of the average Christian reader who encounters the reference to the seventh-day Sabbath, and the interchange which will follow? It tends to be one of negativity toward the institution, as though it were a prescribed day of burdensome "unwork." Contrary to some of these common sentiments, David L. Balch issues the advisory statement, "Christian readers often focus on the legalistic demands of sabbath observance, forgetting its attractions. It is a family day of rest and celebration, not of fasting, insisting that families take time to worship God together despite other cultural and business demands."⁷¹

The scene depicted here is Yeshua and His Disciples performing some of the necessary tasks of the Kingdom of God, and how various onlookers from the religious establishment frowned upon and criticized them for what they were doing. Thankfully, there are indeed examiners who will stress that some background of the Rabbinic tradition is important for understanding these events.⁷² The Torah, in fact, permitted gleaning from the field, and even "you may pluck the heads with your hand" (Deuteronomy 23:24). But, work is decisively prohibited on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; 31:14-15; Leviticus 23:23).

⁶⁸ France, *Matthew*, 463.

⁶⁹ Consult the entry for the Gospel of Luke in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

⁷⁰ Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:133.

⁷¹ David L. Balch, "Luke," in *ECB*, 1115.

⁷² Ellis, 108.

Luke 6:2 As it appears in the majority of English Bibles, v. 2 reads, “But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath?’” (RSV). Many Christian readers, when encountering this, automatically assume that Yeshua and His Disciples are culpable of violating Sabbath commandments in the Torah or Law of Moses. But is this really what is the case here? Many examiners are keen to indicate how one or several of the thirty-nine traditional stipulations found in the Mishnah is instead the issue of the Disciples picking heads of grain:

“The generative acts of labor [prohibited on the Sabbath] are forty less one: (1) he who sews, (2) ploughs, (3) reaps, (4) binds sheaves, (5) threshes, (6) winnows, (7) selects [fit from unfit produce or crops], (8) grinds, (9) sifts, (10) kneads, (11) bakes; (12) he who shears wool, (13) washes it, (14) beats it, (15) dyes it; (16) spins, (17) weaves, (18) makes two loops, (19) weaves two threads, (20) separates two threads, (21) ties, (22) unties, (23) sews two stitches, (24) tears in order to sew two stitches; (25) he who traps a deer, (26) slaughters it, (27) flays it, (28) salts it, (29) cures its hide, (30) scrapes it, and (31) cuts it up; (32) he who writes two letters, (33) erases two letters in order to write two letters; (34) he who builds, (35) tears down; (36) he who puts out a fire, (37) kindles a fire; (38) he who hits with a hammer; (39) he who transports an object from one domain to another—lo, these are the forty generative acts of labor less one” (m.*Shabbat* 7:2).⁷³

Concurrent with this, the Disciples may have been accused of preparing food. But, whether there were any Pentateuchal-proper Sabbath regulations violated—as opposed to some of the varied traditions and customs of Second Temple Judaism—can be textually challenged. Varied translations of *ouk exestin* (οὐκ ἔξεστιν), with the verb *exesti* (ἔξεστι) lacking the root (νόμος) or “law,”⁷⁴ are certainly encountered:

- “Some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is **not allowed** on the sabbath?’” (Moffat New Testament).
- “And some of the Pharisees said: Why do you do what is **forbidden** on the sabbath?” (*Lattimore*).
- “‘Why,’ asked some Pharisees, ‘are you doing something that **isn’t permitted** on the sabbath?’” (Kingdom New Testament).
- “But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is **not permitted** on *Shabbat*?’” (TLV).

The rendering of *ouk exestin* as “not permitted” or “not allowed,” conveys that a violation of the Mosaic Torah might not actually be the issue, but instead various *halachic* rulings about what is and what is not permitted on *Shabbat*. This should hardly mean that such *halachic* rulings do not possess any value, only that they should not be viewed as conveying the same importance as Biblical law. Although he does not note the issue of the term *exesti*, Craig A. Evans does still indicate, “‘What is lawful’ or ‘unlawful’ is an expression which may refer either to the law of Moses or to the oral laws and traditions of the scribes and Pharisees.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 187-188.

⁷⁴ Cf. the differences present in W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1968), pp 356-357.

⁷⁵ Evans, 101.

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Specification in a text like the Gospel of Luke is important. Not to be overlooked in v. 2 is the reference to *tines de tōn Pharisaion eipan* (τινὲς δὲ τῶν Φαρισαίων εἶπαν), “and **certain** of the Pharisees said to them” (YLT). The criticism levied against Yeshua and His Disciples did not come from the views of all Pharisees. *Only certain Pharisees or a Pharisaical sect is represented here.* In the view of Robert H. Stein, “Luke qualified his source by adding ‘some.’ He may have done this in order to avoid condemning all the Pharisees. He knew of some good (Luke 13:31; Acts 5:34-39) and even Christian Pharisees (Acts 15:5).”⁷⁶ John Nolland also thinks, “Mark tends to treat the Pharisees as a fixed group; Luke is more ready to differentiate.”⁷⁷ While we cannot press our options too hard, the brevity of Mark’s Gospel in contrast to the streamlined specification of Luke’s Gospel—may have required some fine-tuning here and there, lest the First Century Believers get the impression that all Pharisees everywhere were enemies of the good news and of Yeshua the Messiah.

Luke 6:3 Luke details how Yeshua directed the Pharisees present, that there was an issue of His Disciples being hungry, noting a past experience of David and his men: “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?” (NIV). It is not stated in the text *how hungry* the Disciples were, but David and his party were certainly *hungry enough* (1 Samuel 21:1-6). The issue of hunger is indeed asserted by the Messiah to be much bigger than potential violation of small Sabbath restrictions. And, it may also be true that the Messiah Himself and what He is doing in declaring the Kingdom of Heaven is more important than the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*. But, is there an intention here for some kind of future abolition of the seventh-day Sabbath? R. Alan Culpepper’s remarks include some statements of accuracy and inaccuracy:

“Jesus...authorizes the provision of food for the hungry even if it means violation of the sabbath. The effects of the new era inaugurated by Jesus continue to ripple outward, sweeping away old conventions, requiring the revaluing of ritual observances in relation to persons, and eliciting opposition from the guardians of religious tradition.”⁷⁸

Messianics favorable to the continued validity of the seventh-day Sabbath, should not take issue with Yeshua the Messiah inaugurating a new era, where various conventions of the past do indeed have to give way to the effects of His salvific work. But did Yeshua actually authorize explicit violation or transgression of the Sabbath in Luke 6:1-5? This can and should be challenged.

Luke 6:4 The major issue for David and his party is how “He entered the House of God and took and ate the Bread of the Presence—which no one is permitted to eat but the *cohanim*” (CJB). The twelve loaves composing the consecrated bread were to be presented before the Lord in the Tabernacle/Temple, and were only permitted to be eaten by the Levitical priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). David, as the then-future king of Israel, had the authority to override a minor Torah regulation, to see that he and his party received nourishment. He and his party were permitted to eat the consecrated bread, on the

⁷⁶ Stein, 188.

⁷⁷ Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:256.

⁷⁸ Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:133.

condition that they had not had sexual relations (1 Samuel 21:4-5). David and his men ate the Bread of the Presence with impunity.

Yeshua the Messiah is the Son of David (3:32; Acts 2:30-36; 13:34-39), and so similarly has authority over what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. Evans appropriately observes,

“Jesus is implying that just as David was going about the task of establishing a new reign in Israel, so now is Jesus going about a similar task. Just as David’s special circumstances made it permissible to eat the consecrated bread, so the present circumstances made it permissible for Jesus and his disciples to ‘harvest’ some food for themselves.”⁷⁹

There need not be any disregard of the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath by Yeshua the Messiah making a reference to the then-future King David eating the Bread of the Presence. Instead, Yeshua has directed His detractors to an example from the Tanach, where there was a violation of minor Torah instructions because of a much more important situation regarding David and his party. Yeshua’s Disciples plucking heads of grain on *Shabbat* was a much less serious issue. I. Howard Marshall is generally correct in his conclusion,

“Jesus...claims the right to reinterpret the OT law on the basis that already in the OT itself it was possible for David to override it....Luke...[brings] together the figures of David and the Son of man to show that Jesus acts as the antitype of David and authorises his followers to do likewise.”⁸⁰

More permissible regarding what would be and not be allowed is Robert H. Stein, who asserts, “If David was free of the restraints of the law on that occasion, how much more is the Son of Man.”⁸¹ Joel B. Green has a much better wording, as he labels what is seen as “the relaxation of legal observance in the face of human need.”⁸² However, those who believe in a post-resurrection era continuance for the Sabbath will probably approach this scene the most from what Nolland says: “David...looked like a law-breaker when he acted according to the law’s true intention.”⁸³ For, within the Torah are both weighty and less-weighty matters—with the preservation of human life being among the most significant issues.

Luke 6:5 The significant assertion from the Messiah, closing this scene, is “The Son of Man is Lord of *Shabbat*” (TLV). How should readers approach *Kurios estin tou sabbatou ho huios tou anthrōpou* (κύριός ἐστιν τοῦ σαββάτου ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου)? Some have taken the reference to “son of man” as being a generic reference to a human being being the master of the Sabbath, and hence with people able to evaluate for themselves what should, and should not, be done on the Sabbath. More have taken the reference to the Son of Man being Lord of the Sabbath as Yeshua the Messiah being the One who possesses the authority to determine what is, and what is not, permitted on the Sabbath. This would require “Son of Man” to be regarded as a Messianic title,⁸⁴ and in association with the

⁷⁹ Evans, pp 99-100.

⁸⁰ Marshall, *Luke*, 232.

⁸¹ Stein, 188.

⁸² Green, pp 253-254.

⁸³ Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:257.

⁸⁴ Evans, 101; Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:134.

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Daniel 7:13-14 theophany, the figure of the Son of Man being seated next to the Ancient of Days, and being the One whom the entire Creation must serve and revere. The Son of Man being Lord of the Sabbath is a very serious claim for Yeshua to have made, as Marshall properly indicates, “the point of the saying is that here Jesus claims an authority tantamount to that of God with respect to the interpretation of the law.”⁸⁵

Leon Morris is one who is notably critical to “son of man” being a reference to a human being in general, also describing how Yeshua is describing a Divine, Messianic function in being “Lord of the Sabbath” here:

“He claims that he, the Son of man, is *lord of the sabbath*. This is a staggering claim, for the sabbath was of divine institution (Ex. 20:8-11). To be lord of a divine institution is to have a very high place indeed. Some take *Son of man* to mean ‘man’ (as the Aramaic original often does). They take the verse to mean that man is supreme over the sabbath. This would fit neatly with the preceding, but there are difficulties. Jesus never taught that man is lord over a divine institution. Again, in the Gospels *Son of Man* invariably means Jesus. He is surely referring to his Messianic function. It may be significant that this follows a reference to David’s action. It is the Son of David who is Lord. If David could override the law without blame, how much more could the much greater Son of David do so?”⁸⁶

While it is clear enough from the record of Luke 6:1-5 that some things, because of the needs of the moment, are more important than the standard, customary formalities of the Sabbath, **and that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord of the Sabbath and can determine what is permitted on the Sabbath**—is there at all an intended, future abolition of the Sabbath detectable here? Green is among those Christian commentators who doubts it:

“For Jesus...the question [is]...Who interprets Scripture (and, so, the Sabbath law) correctly? Or, to put it more starkly, Who knows and represents God’s will? Not the Sabbath law per se, but this more fundamental question comes to the fore in Jesus’ response to his rivals in vv 3 and 9. In both instances, Jesus’ analysis is the same: Scribal specifications have missed the salvific purpose of God resident in the Sabbath, but Jesus, in declaring the onset of the eschatological Jubilee (see above on 4:18-19), has made this day (‘today,’ 4:21) the day for providing for humans. Jesus is less concerned with abrogating Sabbath law, and more concerned with bringing the grace of God to concrete expression in his own ministry, not least on the Sabbath.”⁸⁷

Green does think that the Messiah is more important than the Sabbath, as the will of God should be centered in Him, and not in just one day out of the week. Green draws the further, appropriate conclusion, that the scene in view highlights not any kind of Sabbath violation, but instead the Messiah as the One who gets to determine what is permissible activity on the Sabbath:

“[T]he disciples have not violated the Sabbath, as they had been accused; rather, the Son of Man, who has authority over the Sabbath, has permitted them to pluck and eat on the Sabbath. This is not a rejection of the Sabbath or of Sabbath observance in general, but it does undercut the utility of Sabbath observance as a boundary-keeping mechanism

⁸⁵ Marshall, *Luke*, 233.

⁸⁶ Morris, *Luke*, 135.

⁸⁷ Green, 252.

(i.e., as a sign of faithfulness to God), and it designates Jesus as God's authorized agent to determine what was appropriate on the Sabbath."⁸⁸

Nolland likewise emphasizes that what is intended here is not Sabbath violation but Sabbath application, and further concludes that the Messiah demonstrated the true intentions of the Sabbath by allowing His Disciples to pluck heads of grain:

"[W]hen David acted in this way, it is to be understood that he interpreted the true intention of the enscripturated will of God, so also it should be understood that when the Son of Man makes provision for his disciples on the sabbath, he is not violating the sabbath but as Lord of the sabbath revealing its true significance."⁸⁹

It should be enough for today's Bible readers to recognize that Yeshua the Messiah and His Disciples did not violate strict, Biblical Sabbath instructions in Luke 6:1-5, but following the example of David before them, had some unique circumstances which required them to disregard the customs of their day, so they could eat. It should also be enough for today's Bible readers to conclude that the issue in Luke 6:1-5 is hardly some intended abrogation of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* by Yeshua the Messiah, but instead that as Lord of the Sabbath, He gets to determine the proper course of action for His followers—**and that His reign indeed permits a reevaluation of some of the customary prohibitions for the day**. Yeshua the Messiah is more important than the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, but this same Yeshua the Messiah is Lord of the Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Keeping the Sabbath, without a focus upon Him and what He has done, will mean a detachment from His Kingdom and the benefits of the redemption He provides.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 254.

⁸⁹ Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:258.