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THE SABBATH IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW: A PARADIGM FOR UNDERSTANDING THE LAW IN MATTHEW?

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The problem of the Matthean understanding of law has proved resistant to resolution, despite a mini-deluge of scholarly output on the subject. In contrast to the widely divergent approaches to the general issue of law in Matthew, however, there is a strong majority opinion that the Gospel was written amongst a Sabbath-observant community.[1] Despite the occasional contrary voice,[2] it is probably fair to describe this majority opinion as a consensus. Nor is this consensus surprising, given that it is based on strong evidence. Compared to the other Synoptic Gospels, Matthew is clearly at pains to remove any possible doubt that

[1]It would be impractical to cite every reference to the Sabbath-observant nature of the Matthean community, but the following might be considered representative: G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 116; Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM, 1963), 31, 81-83; Eduard Schweizer, *Matthäus und seine Gemeinde* (Stuttgart: KBW, 1974), 138; John Mark Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1-14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27 (1984): 79-91, esp. 91; Ingo Broer, "Anmerkungen zum Gesetzesverständnis des Matthäus," in *Das Gesetz im neuen Testament*, ed. Johannes Beutler et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), 137-141; J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 80-82; David L. Balch, ed., *Social History of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 7, 48.

[2]For example, Georg Strecker interprets Matt 12:1-14 in terms of Jesus' elevating the moral aspect of the Sabbath over the ceremonial aspect (*Der Weg der Gerechtigkeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). E. P. Sanders rightly protests against this kind of distinction between ceremonial and moral law in the teachings of Jesus (*Jesus and Judaism* [London: SCM, 1985], 250-251). It is an alien category to the language and thought world of the Gospel accounts, especially the Gospel of Matthew. Graham Stanton raises doubts as to whether the redactional changes the evangelist has made to his Markan Vorlage really do indicate that the community was still Sabbath-observant, and in his conclusion states that there is not enough evidence to confirm or deny the possibility (*A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992], 203-205).

the Sabbath might not retain its validity for the disciple of Jesus.[3] It is only in Matthew that Jesus defends his disciples as guiltless (ἀναίτιοι, Matt 12:7). Likewise, in defending the actions of the disciples, Matthew includes three further arguments not found in the parallel Gospels (Matt 12:5-6, 7, 11-12a). Furthermore, there is no parallel to the dominical saying recorded in Mark 2:27 (NIV), "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." By these differences the Gospel of Matthew is more careful than either Mark or Luke to show that Jesus and the disciples did not in any way break the Sabbath or speak of its demise.[4] In fact, within Matthew, the dispute is about **how** the Sabbath should

[3]The current debate as to whether Mark or Matthew has priority, as reflected in Arthur Bellinzoni, ed., *The Two Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1985); and David L. Duncan, ed., *The Interrelations of the Gospels,* Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 95 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), does not affect this assertion. It is possible to see a difference of emphasis between two synoptic Gospels without needing first to determine which derived from the other. The only necessary assumption is that there is some kind of relationship between them, on which not only both the "two-Gospel" and the "two-source" advocates agree, but also those who are promoting yet other approaches.

[4]A discussion of whether either Jesus or the evangelists responsible for Mark or Luke intended to abandon Sabbath observance lies outside the purview of this paper. Willy Rordorf argues that Jesus' actions amount to deliberately provocative breaking of the Sabbath: "The Sabbath commandment was not merely pushed into the background by the healing activity of Jesus: it was simply annulled" (*Sunday* [London: SCM, 1968], 70; cf. 54-79). According to Rordorf, Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath was considered as "something monstrous" (65) by the early church, which altered the tradition to explain that Jesus' actions were not in fact contrary to the true meaning of the Sabbath. He specifically denies that Matt 5:17-18 is an authentic saying of Jesus (77), and while he does not say explicitly, one would imagine he also doubts the authenticity of Matt 12:3-7, 11-12a, and would therefore explain them as part of the early church's "transform[ation] of the content about Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath" (73). For Rordorf, Jesus' attitude is shown by the authentic and provocative incident of the disciples' plucking grain, and Jesus' reply that the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath. Rordorf is not alone in suggesting that Jesus or the Gospels broke with Sabbath observance; see Harald Riesenfeld, "The Sabbath and the Lord's Day in Judaism, the Preaching of Jesus and Early Christianity," in *The Gospel Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 111-37; M. D. Goulder, *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1974), 17-18; Eduard Lohse, "Σαββατον," *TDNT* 7:22, 27-28. Others argue that Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels presuppose continued Sabbath-observance: Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian Press, 1977); D. A. Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 57-97; Robert L. Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), 18-34, 43-52; Sanders, 250, 264-267; Herold Weiss, "The Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels," *JSNT* 38 (1990): 13-27; Walter F. Specht, "The Sabbath in the New Testament," in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History,* ed. K. A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 92-105.

be observed, not if it should be observed.[5] That it should continue to be observed is taken for granted.

Given this relatively secure datum, this article will attempt to explore the implications of Sabbath-keeping for the vexed question of the law in the Gospel of Matthew. Indeed, most of the issues related to that wider question are reflected in the texts that deal with the Sabbath: if the Sabbath law is still binding on Christians, then in what way has it been transformed by the Christ event? Is Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath law so radical that, in practice if not in theory, it overthrows any significance the Sabbath might have in the life of a Christian? These questions can only be answered by a careful scrutiny of the relevant texts.

The Range of Evidence

Compared to Mark and Luke, Matthew somewhat deemphasizes the Sabbath. The other two Synoptic Gospels place an account of a Sabbath miracle right at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus (Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37). Indeed, it could be argued that both use Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath as a paradigm for his whole ministry, especially Luke. Not only is this Sabbath incident missing in Matthew, the repositioning of the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law to 8:14-15 removes its sequential association with the Sabbath (cf. Mark 1:21, 29; Luke 4:31, 38), even though the influx of others in need of healing when it became evening (Matt 8:16a) remains inexplicable without the information that these others had waited till after the Sabbath. Robert Mohrlang argues that Matthew's omission is deliberate, as it has the effect of removing Jesus' possible Sabbath violations from their embarrassing position of prominence in the other two Gospels. The two remaining Sabbath controversies are moved to a place in the Gospel well after 5:17-20, where it has been clearly established that the law has continuing validity.[6] Be that as it may,[7] the principal Matthean texts that deal with the Sabbath are found in Matt 12:1-14. In addition, Matt

[5]"The Gospel is concerned not so much with the question of keeping the Sabbath at all, as with the question of how rigidly it was to be kept" (Kilpatrick, 116).

[6]Robert Mohrlang, *Matthew and Paul* (Cambridge: University Press, 1984), 9-10.

[7]While Mohrlang's observations are inherently plausible and fit well with the overall tenor of the Gospel, it is nevertheless possible that the healing of the demoniac was omitted for other reasons, such as the possibility that the evangelist had already decided to include the dramatic healing of the two Gadarene demoniacs (Matt 8:28-34) and was wishing to limit the number of healings recorded in Matt 8-9, the two chapters devoted to them. In other words, it is hard to speak with confidence on this matter.

11:28-30 and 24:20c should be mentioned in any discussion on the Sabbath in Matthew.

Matt 11:28-30 is unique to Matthew and linked to Matt 12:1-14 in at least three ways: (a) Matt 12:1-14 follows immediately on 11:28-30;[8] (b) the rest Jesus promises in 11:28 fits thematically with the "rest" of the Sabbath;[9] and (c) the phrase ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ (12:1a), unique to Matthew, underlines the connection between the saying and the incident following.[10] To assist in carrying their burdens, Jesus enjoins his followers to take his yoke upon them.[11] In Sir 6:18-31 and 51:23-27, wisdom, law, and yoke are linked together:[12] the yoke of wisdom is instruction in the law. This kind of linkage fits nicely the context of this saying in Matthew.[13] Jesus' interpretation of the law would be the

[8]Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 299.

[9]Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Matthew 11:28-30: Jesus' Rest and the Sabbath," *AUSS* 22 (1984): 296-302; Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 167; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 220; Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 195; Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1976), 277.

[10]W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 2:288-289, 305; Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 113.

[11]The image of one carrying heavy burdens makes unlikely Eduard Schweizer's suggestion that instead of a yoke used to assist in carrying heavy loads, Jesus is in fact referring to the yoke of a prisoner of war, an otherwise attractive interpretation in the light of the more stringent application of the law made by Jesus in places like Matt 5:21-48 (*Good News*, 272-273).

[12]Most commentators sense the importance of these texts to the interpretation of this passage, but few would go so far as Goulder who claims that they are a midrash on Sirach (362-363).

[13]M. Jack Suggs makes a convincing case for identifying Jesus with wisdom and his yoke with his interpretation of law (*Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970], 99-108. Others who so understand the reference include Gundry (219-220) and Hans Dieter Betz ("The Logion of the Easy Yoke and of Rest, Matt 11:28-30," *JBL* 86 [1967]: 22-23. M. Maher shows evidence linking the image of the yoke to the law ("'Take My Yoke Upon You,' Matt. xi. 29," *NTS* 22 [1976]: 98-100). Celia Deutsch understands the reference to "my yoke" as a description of Jesus as wisdom incarnate and specifically rejects any link between the yoke and the Torah (*Hidden Wisdom and the Easy Yoke: Wisdom, Torah and Discipleship in Matthew 11:25-30*, *JSNT* Supplement 18 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987], 115-139). Other interpretations, such as the suggestion that the yoke is "the yoke of a Kingdom in which 'Abba, Father' is sovereign, the 'rest' of which is the peace of that new relationship with God" (A. M. Hunter, "Crux Critocorum—Matt xi.25-30: A Re-appraisal," *NTS* 8 [1961-62]: 248-249), or

easy yoke which he offers to the burdened, and the way in which Jesus' interpretation of the law is easy is thereupon illustrated by his understanding of the Sabbath. Thus Matt 11:28-30 should be understood both as introducing the Sabbath controversies of Matt 12:1-14 and informing the reader or listener that Jesus brings true rest to those burdened by their understanding of the Sabbath.

A study of the phrase *μηδὲ σαββάτῳ* in Matt 24:20c, on the other hand, probably should be excluded from this discussion of the Sabbath in Matthew, despite its occasional use as evidence that the Matthean community was Sabbath-observant.[14] The flight spoken of in Matt 24:20 is so urgent that Jesus' listeners are not even to go into their houses if they are on the roof, or cross a field to regain their cloak (24:17-18). From 1 Macc 2:29-41 we learn that taking action to save one's life on the Sabbath was considered appropriate long before NT times. While there is always uncertainty tracing later Rabbinic thought directly back into NT times, it is clear that the Rabbis taught that at times of deadly peril the law of *pekuah nepeš* took effect. In Rabbinic Judaism there would be no question about fleeing in time of crisis, even on the Sabbath day. It is even less likely that the members of a Christian group like the Matthean community, who defended the right of their leader to heal on the Sabbath, would have any qualms about fleeing for their lives on a Sabbath. The phrase in Matt 24:20c would then have some other significance unrelated to the Gospel's theology of Sabbath.[15] Thus

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that the yoke "is the yoke of the Kingdom, . . . [which] is to accept the sovereignty of God and to give oneself to His service" (T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* [London: SCM, 1949], 186), or that the references to a yoke and rest refer to the prophetic image of breaking the yoke of oppression and entering into national rest (B. Charette, "'To Proclaim Liberty to the Captives': Matt 11:28-30 in the Light of Prophetic Expectation," *NTS* 38 [1992]: 290-297), all make valid theological points, but overlook the prominent role the law takes in the Kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 5:19).

[14]E.g., Günther Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation*, 31; Dennis MacDonald, "A Response to R. Goldenberg and D. J. Harrington, S.J.," in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. T. C. Eskenazi, D. J. Harrington, W. H. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 60-61; Erich Spier, *Der Sabbat* (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1989), 111.

[15]So also Stanton, 203-206. Eric Kun-Chun Wong takes Stanton to task for denying the possibility that the Matthean community does not keep the Sabbath strictly, charging him with using a predetermined conclusion to force the meaning of this particular text ("The Matthean Understanding of the Sabbath: A Response to G. N. Stanton," *JSNT* 44 [1991]: 3-18, reacting to Graham Stanton, "'Pray that your Flight may not be in Winter or on a Sabbath': Matthew 24:20," *JSNT* 37 [1989]: 17-30 and republished as chap. 8 of his *Gospel for a New People*). However, his suggestion that the phrase *μηδὲ σαββάτῳ* is a concession to the "weaker brethren" of the Matthean community who wish to retain a very strict observance of the Sabbath fails to account for the fact that all the available

the truly significant Matthean Sabbath passage is Matt 12:1-14, together with its introduction, Matt 11:28-30.

Matt 12:1-8: The Incident in the Grainfield

The Pharisees' accusation that the disciples were breaking the Sabbath appears to have been based on their understanding that by plucking grain they were engaging in the work of reaping.[16] This assumption is not challenged, despite the fact that the disciples' actions are described as ἀναίτιοι. In other words, their actions, while in technical breach of the Sabbath commandment, were not liable under law.[17] The defense against the charge is given in three stages: the example of David, the analogy of the priests, and the citation from Hosea.

For a variety of reasons, a significant number of commentators find the appeal to the example of David and his men eating showbread inappropriate: There is no reference of any kind to the Sabbath in the story of David and his men;[18] the disciples' hunger does not seem proportionate to the hunger and need of David and his men; and the later Rabbinic rule pointed out that Halakah could not be determined on grounds of Haggadah.[19] These problems should make the interpreter seek the point(s) of comparison between the two events rather than the differences, because the three Synoptic evangelists considered that the argument had merit enough to warrant its inclusion. Common to the two events is the violation of the holy: the disciples violate the holiness

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information would indicate that even they would consider it lawful to escape destruction by fleeing on Sabbath.

[16]Morris, 300. Presumably rubbing the grain between the hands and blowing to remove the husk could be understood as threshing and winnowing. Reaping, threshing, and winnowing were all listed in the 39 categories of work prohibited by *Šabb.* 7:2.

[17]ἀν-αίτιος, i.e., without αἰτία, charge, legal ground for complaint.

[18]*Menaḥ* 95b records rabbinic discussion as to whether the showbread eaten by David was baked on the Sabbath. Nothing of this is visible in the recorded words of Jesus, who instead points out that David and his men were hungry (Matt 12:3), the element highlighted by the Matthean inclusion of the observation that the disciples of Jesus were hungry (v. 1).

[19]David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956), 68-69; cf. Matty Cohen, "La Controverse de Jésus et des Pharisiens à propos de la cueillette d'épis, selon l'évangile de Saint Matthieu," *Mélanges de science religieuse* 34 (1977): 3-12. Daube himself points to the greatest weakness of such an assertion: whether or not the distinction was valid for the time of Jesus. "To be sure, the principle in question was the result of a long and slow evolution. But by the middle of the 1st cent. A.D., notwithstanding certain vestiges of a less rigorous attitude, it was, if not firmly established, at least rapidly gaining ground" (69).

of a day, while David and his men violate the holiness of a place.[20] A first-century reader of or listener to the Gospel of Matthew might reason that as a man "after God's heart" (1 Sam 13:14), whose life had been blameless except in the case of Bathsheba (1 Kings 15:3-5), David was guiltless, and thus his taking the bread was justifiable. But why was it justifiable within the bounds of the text in Matthew? The two clues provided are the reference to the disciples' hunger (Matt 12:1d, unique to Matthew), and the insistence that God seeks mercy, not sacrifice (Matt 12:7). Although a reference to the hunger of David is lacking in 1 Sam 21:1-6, it is supplied in Matt 12:3b (and parallels), linking the actions of the disciples and the followers of David to the same motivation: hunger.[21] An argument that human need, any human need, justifies the breach of Divine laws which would otherwise be observed also fits well with the following miracle of Sabbath healing and is perhaps the best explanation of the analogy with David.[22]

The next analogy, that of the priests' activities in the temple on the Sabbath (Matt 12:5), shares a common element with David's actions in taking the holy bread. Both David and the priests do something which they should not do according to the law. It was not lawful (οὐκ ἐξὸν, Matt 12:4b) for David and his men to eat the showbread.[23] Likewise, the priests profane[24] the Sabbath in the temple, but are not liable under law. Exactly in what way they profane the Sabbath is not spelled out, but we read that their prescribed duties did involve activities which would have been described as unlawful for the Sabbath

[20]Phillip Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 133; cf. Morna D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK, 1967), 97-98.

[21]Richard S. McConnell, *Law and Prophecy in Matthew's Gospel* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1969), 67.

[22]The suggestion of Banks, that the two events are further linked by the comparison of David and the Son of David, while not inherently implausible, finds little support in the text (115). Neither does the interpretation of Marcus J. Borg, that the link between the two events was that the urgency of David's mission matched the urgency of Jesus, overriding any considerations regarding the Sabbath (*Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* [Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1984], 152-153.

[23]"The relation between the OT story and the present instance of infringement of the Sabbath by the disciples of Jesus is obviously that righteous people are in both cases doing what is forbidden" (Lohse, 22).

[24]Βεβηλόω is used twice in the NT, here and Acts 24:6. One can profane the Sabbath (Ezek 20:13), the sanctuary (Ezek 28:18; Acts 24:6), and God's name (Lev 21:6).

if performed anywhere besides the temple.[25] The temple took precedence over the Sabbath. How much more, then, should something greater than the temple take precedence over the Sabbath.[26] So far the argument is clear, but what is present in the grain fields that is greater than the temple? Commentators have put forward a wide variety of suggestions: the Kingdom of God,[27] Jesus as the incarnation of the Spirit of God,[28] the superior service of the disciples of Jesus,[29] and the call to provide for human life which is the required response to the love command,[30] to give but four examples. The Kingdom of God, the love command, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18, 20) are all important in Matthew, but appear nowhere in this pericope. Furthermore, it is difficult to see that the disciples' plucking ears of grain could be readily viewed as service. Perhaps it is best to understand Jesus as the one who is greater than the temple.[31] His presence would certainly give full weight to the ὧδε, and it was on his authority that the disciples were doing these things (cf. v. 8). If so, that Jesus should

[25]One has only to consider the labor involved in dismembering and burning the prescribed Sabbath sacrifices—the regular daily sacrifice (Num 28:1-8), together with the extra sacrifices to be offered on the Sabbath day only (Num 28:9-10). Etan Levine wishes to identify the profanation of the Sabbath spoken of here as the "rigorously defended Pharisaic practice of reaping the first sheaves . . . offering . . . even if that day were a Sabbath" ("The Sabbath Controversy According to Matthew," *NTS* 22 (1975-76): 481. It is agreed that reaping this offering on the Sabbath nicely parallels the activity of the disciples plucking grain, but the only identification of the kind of work provided in the text of Matthew, that it takes place in the *temple*, makes it nearly impossible to maintain any link with the reaping of the offering of first-fruits.

[26]So Davies and Allison, 2:314.

[27]Manson, 189.

[28]Georges Ganders points out: "Les Juifs affirmaient que Dieu remplissait le Temple de Jérusalem de sa présence. Estimant également que le St. Esprit se trouvait dans les chrétiens, l'apôtre Paul leur disait: «Vous êtes le Temple de Dieu» (1 Cor. 3/16) ou: «Votre corps est le Temple du St. Esprit» (1 Cor. 6/19). A plus forte raison, donc, Jésus de Nazareth, incarnation de l'Esprit de Dieu dans un homme, pouvait-il entendre qu'il était le Temple du Seigneur, le vrai Temple, plus encore que le Temple de pierres de Jérusalem (Cf. J. 2/29-21)" (*L'évangile de l'église* [Aix-en-Provence: Faculté libre, 1970], 109).

[29]Birger Gerhardsson, "Sacrificial Service and Atonement in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974), 28.

[30]Sigal, 132. Sigal openly acknowledges a preference for a non-Christological interpretation, as this fits his thesis that there was little difference between Jesus and the proto-rabbis, the forerunners of later Rabbinic Judaism (134).

[31]So Davies and Allison, 2:314; Gundry, 223.

be compared to the temple in this way is an extraordinary claim. The temple was designated by God as the place to meet with his people (Exod 29:42-45). It was the place where God manifested himself. Is the claim that Jesus is greater than the temple a claim that Jesus is the superior manifestation of God's presence,[32] or that his mediation is superior to that available through the temple? Certainly other writers in the NT thought so (e.g., Heb 9:11-14, 24-26; 10:19-22), but this must remain an open question as there is very little additional data on the matter in the Gospel.[33]

The third argument involves the citation of a scripture found twice in Matthew, and not elsewhere in the NT. What does "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" mean in this context? The Pharisees are accused of demanding sacrifice above mercy. By expecting the disciples to remain hungry they are demanding sacrifice when in fact they should have been showing mercy. Does this mean that mercy empties the Sabbath command of all meaning?[34] Hardly, because this very quotation is cited to show that the disciples are *ἀναίτιοι*. Yet it does show a hierarchy of obligation. The obligation of mercy is greater than the obligation of Sabbath observance.[35] Hos 6:6 was not a call for the Israelites to abandon the giving of sacrificial offerings and, as used in Matthew, it was not a call to give up Sabbath-observance. It was a demand that priority should be given to the important matter of mercy. On the grounds of mercy, the disciples' actions were not in breach of the

[32]So A. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1959), 396.

[33]John P. Meier comments that, "In his very person, and finally by his sacrificial death, Jesus replaces the Temple and all the sacrifices prescribed by the law" (*The Vision of Matthew* [New York: Paulist, 1978]). This is a fairly accurate summation of the theology of Hebrews. What makes one cautious of interpreting this verse in the same manner, though, is that the Gospel of Matthew retains an ambiguous stance towards the temple and its services, as indeed, did much of the early church, if the evidence of Acts is any guide. Aside from Matt 26:28, there is no suggestion that the death of Jesus is linked to sacrifices. In Matt 1:21 Jesus is given that name because he will save his people from their sin. But as Gerhardsson points out, "The interpretation of Jesus' name says nothing about the way in which Jesus saves his people from their sins. There is no suggestion that this is to happen exclusively through his sacrificial death" (Gerhardssohn, 26). See also Tibor Horvath, *The Sacrificial Interpretation of Jesus' Achievement in the New Testament* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1979), 38-39.

[34]Alexander Sand notes: "Wenn es dem Verfasser des Matthäusevangeliums auch nicht ganz gelungen ist, in den Markuszusammenhang älteres Überlieferungs gut einzubauen, so wird seine redaktionelle Absicht doch deutlich: Erbarmen mit den Mitmenschen läßt die Aufhebung eines Toragebotes zu . . ." (*Das Gesetz und die Propheten*, Biblische Untersuchungen 11 [Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1974], 61.

[35]Davies and Allison, 2:315.

Sabbath. Furthermore, these considerations make it unlikely that this verse should be interpreted in terms of an inner ethical demand.[36]

The statement that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" is not an argument. Rather, it is nothing less than a declaration that Jesus exercises authority over the Sabbath.

Two themes run through Jesus' defense of the disciples. First, there is a hierarchy of obligation, even in the law.[37] The need of the disciples took priority over the prohibition of work on the Sabbath. Second, there is a strongly christocentric focus. Jesus declares himself both greater than the temple and Lord over the Sabbath. A significant part of the reasoning appears to be that the disciples' actions were defensible in terms of who Jesus is.

What is not said in defense of the disciples may be equally significant. In Matt 12:1-8, Jesus does not dismiss the charge that plucking the grain is Sabbath-breaking on the grounds that it is trivial. Neither does he say that the Sabbath belongs to a segment of the law which has no validity for his followers.

Matt 12:9-14: The Healing

Matt 12:9 underlines the linkage between the two Sabbath incidents; the healing took place as the next occurrence in the flow of events.[38] The Matthean version of the healing is shaped to highlight the basic issue of lawfulness. The question asked by the unspecified interlocutors is unique to Matthew: "Is it lawful (ἔξεστιν) to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matt 12: 10b). This, in fact, is a fair question, and one that intrigues commentators to this day. Jesus healed the individual by a word. Unlike what he did in John 9:6, Jesus did not make clay; and unlike the incident narrated in Matt 9:6, he did not command the man to carry his pallet on the Sabbath. There was no transgression even of later Rabbinic strictures regarding the Sabbath. But the case was a nonurgent one. A hand does not become "withered" overnight, and the

[36]This would go against Strecker, 32-33.

[37]Carson affirms: "The point is not only that some laws by their very nature formally conflict with other laws, but that the more important law or principle takes precedence" (66).

[38]Contrast Luke 6:6, where the healing is said to take place ἐν ἑτέρῳ σαββάτῳ, which is likewise implied in Mark 3:1. Despite the common theme of controversy over the Sabbath, it appears that the Matthean evangelist was at pains to link further the two stories into an organic whole.

condition was certainly not life-threatening. Thus the healing could as easily have been done outside the hours of the Sabbath.[39]

Jesus defends his actions on the basis of a *qal wehomer* argument: if assistance is offered to a domestic animal, and if a person is of more value than an animal, assistance should be offered to a person in need.[40] The appropriateness of the citation of Hos 6:6 in Matt 12:7 is evident. It is indeed lawful to alleviate suffering and misery on the Sabbath. Assistance should not be restricted to life-threatening situations.

As with the previous incident, the evangelist has emphasized the continuing obligation of Sabbath observance. Jesus was not going beyond the real intention of the Sabbath by acts of healing. In a word, his actions were perfectly lawful. But nevertheless one must inquire as to the limitations that the evangelist might place on the principle that all acts of mercy become lawful, even nonurgent ones like alleviating a casual hunger or chronic, nonlife-threatening illness easily coped with at another time. These questions lead naturally to consideration of the implications which these two accounts have for the Matthean understanding of Sabbath. Further, one must consider the significance such an understanding might have for the Matthean concept of law.

Some Implications

Continuity of Law

The two Sabbath controversies recorded in Matt 12:1-14 illustrate the evangelist's understanding of the continuity of the law, previously expressed so dramatically in Matt 5:17-20. The law is preserved; Sabbath observance is retained. Yet, though there is an undeniable continuity in the disciples' relationship to the law, Jesus brings a freshness in his approach to the law that is in strong contrast to the Pharisees who oppose him in this incident (Matt 12:2, 14). Indeed, this freshness of approach might almost be described as a radical transformation of the law, a point taken up below.

Hierarchy of Law

In clear contrast to the teaching of the Pharisees described in Matt 12, Matt 12:1-8 outlines a clear hierarchy of law.[41] In observing the Sabbath, at times one law must be breached in the keeping of another law. Some laws and principles of action are more important than others.

[39]Gundry, 226.

[40]Daniel J. Harrington, "Sabbath Tensions: Matthew 12:1-14 and Other New Testament Texts," in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, 49.

[41]Bacchiocchi, 52-53; Carson, 66.

It is good to be so scrupulous in observing the Sabbath that one refrains from plucking even a few ears of grain to eat them, but it is better to place the alleviation of even trivial human need above such scrupulosity. The two accounts highlight at least two important principles that should take priority in deciding what is lawful activity on the Sabbath: the principles of mercy (Matt 12:7) and of doing good (Matt 12:12).

Radical Transformation of Law

While the law is preserved, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is radically changed at the same time. Human need should take precedence over the Sabbath, understandably enough, but in both examples the human need was not great. To what extent the disciples were hungry is not said, but the casual plucking of grain does not give the impression of resolving a life-threatening situation or even serious hunger. Certainly, the disease of the man with the withered hand was chronic, not acute. So, what happens to Sabbath observance when human need, no matter how trivial, takes precedence? If, like Jesus, much of one's weekly activity is taken up by healing, how does one make a distinction between the Sabbath and other days of healing? If trivial matters can intervene, what is left?

It is hard to know how the evangelist would have reacted to such questions. From the way Sabbath-observance is carefully preserved it is unlikely that any radical abandonment of distinctions made between the Sabbath and other days is envisaged. But within clear view is a freer understanding of what is appropriate for the Sabbath and what is not.

Christocentricity

The other theme that emerges, especially in the grainfield incident, is the christocentric nature of the newly transformed Sabbath. The presence of one who is greater than the temple underlies the disciple's ability to break with Pharisaic conventions regarding Sabbath observance (Matt 12:6). Furthermore, Jesus is Lord over the Sabbath (v. 8). Thus the authority and presence of Jesus bring with them new attitudes and new observances.

Implications for the Matthean Theology of Law

Each of these elements has implications for and resonances with the way the law is treated elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew. It will not be possible to develop this in any detail, but two elements may be indicated.

In the Matthean presentation of the Sabbath controversies in Matt 12:1-14 it clearly emerges that while the law is retained, in its very retention it has become transformed by the central fact of the person of Jesus. The law is under the authority of Jesus. He determines the

new directions in which the community will act. In this he has unparalleled authority. These motifs find significant parallels in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). Even though the smallest element of the law will not be changed (v. 19), under the authority of Jesus new attitudes to the law emerge, as indicated by the recurrent variations on the phrase Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις· . . ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι . . .(5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). This new observance of the law differs from the old. In other words, as with the Sabbath, all law is transformed by the presence and authority of Jesus, even as it retains its validity.

In Matt 12:1-14 there is a clear understanding that while all law places an obligation on the follower of Jesus, some laws appear as more important than others. This also finds parallels elsewhere in Matthew. For example, in a saying unique to the Gospel, Christians are told not to neglect paying tithe on the mint, dill, and cummin (Matt 23:23), yet they should remember that there are weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. If there is any conflict, the lesser should unhesitatingly be put aside. Not unique to the Gospel of Matthew, but certainly close to the heart of its understanding of law, is the priority given to love as the first and great commandment (Matt 22:34-39).

Conclusions

Matthew's treatment of the Sabbath controversies is distinctive in many ways. The material unique to the Gospel shows greater interest in the question of Sabbath observance within the parameters of the law than the other Synoptics, although they also are interested in the question. As it is reported by Matthew, Jesus argues on the basis of continued validity for the law. He defends the correctness of his disciples' plucking of grain on the Sabbath by emphasizing the hierarchy of obligations found within the law: human need takes precedence (12:3-4), as does the holy (12:4), and mercy is more important than sacrifice (12:7). If these principles are taken into consideration, the disciples are guiltless before the law.

Jesus defends his own actions of healing on the Sabbath on the basis of the utmost importance of human need (12:11-12). Thus, while the Sabbath law remains valid in the life of the believer, there is a different relation to it than that adopted by the Pharisees in 12:2, 14. The law is viewed from the perspective of the Christ event, with a clear understanding that there are some principles which are to be upheld, even though this might result in new ways of observing the Sabbath. These observations might well form useful points of comparison with other elements of the Gospel of Matthew which need to be consulted in forming an understanding of the total Matthean theology of law.