



Breaking or Freeing?

Jesus, the Sabbath,
and John 5:18



Steven Thompson,
PhD, served as head of
the school of ministry
and theology at Avondale
University, Cooranbong, New
South Wales, Australia.



SCAN FOR AUDIO

John 5:18 is typically translated, “For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him [Jesus], because he was not only *breaking* the sabbath . . .” (NRSV; emphasis added). This reading, found in both the King James and the New King James versions of the Bible, naturally leads to a question: Did Jesus really break the Sabbath?

A more context-sensitive translation of the Greek verb *luō* in this verse yields a fundamentally different message about Jesus’ relationship to the Sabbath. The translation is as follows: “This is why the Jews sought to kill him; not only was he *setting free* the sabbath . . .”¹ Can this translation, which receives little serious attention from translators and commentators, be justified? Would not this translation, if valid, solve a theological problem that otherwise portrays Jesus, our sinless sacrifice, as having sinned?

Setting free

The standard New Testament Greek-English lexicon² offers five definitions of the verb *luō*; the first four are the most relevant to John 5:18:

1. “to undo someth. that is used to tie up or constrain someth., *loose, untie*”
2. “to set free someth. tied or similarly constrained, *set free, loose, untie*”
3. “to reduce someth. by violence into its components, *destroy*”
4. “to do away with, *destroy, bring to an end, abolish*”³

The six occurrences of *luō* in John’s Gospel are best distributed among these four definitions as follows

1. John 1:27 “I am not worthy to *loose, untie* the strap of his sandal”;
John 11:44 “*loose, untie* him [Lazarus from his burial wrappings] and let him go.”
2. John 5:18 “[Jesus] was *setting free, loosing, untying* the Sabbath.”
3. John 2:19 “*destroy* this temple and in three days I will rebuild it”;
John 7:23 “a male is circumcised on Sabbath in order not to *destroy* [a component of] the law of Moses.”
4. John 10:35 “and Scripture is not liable to be *brought to an end, abolished*.”

There is, then, linguistic justification for translating *luō* in John 5:18 as “setting free.” The next step to justify this translation will be to locate the passage in its cultural and religious setting.

The healing

John 5 records Jesus’ visit to the pool of Bethzatha while in Jerusalem during a major religious celebration.⁴ Because the pool was believed to be a place where divine healings happened, many of the city’s sick waited under the five porticos surrounding it in hopes of healing. Among them was a man who had been ill for 38 years (John 5:5), a significant number of years for the Jewish people. The wilderness wandering of their Israelite ancestors—from when they first refused God’s command to enter the Promised Land until they finally did enter—lasted 38 years (see Deut. 2:14).

Jesus, seeing the sick man, asked, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6). What a strange question. Of course, he wanted to be made well. Otherwise, why spend so much time near that healing water?

However, instead of answering Jesus’ question, he started explaining why he was still unwell: “I have no human to help me into the pool! Someone else always gets into the healing water before me!” (v. 7). Could his statement be understood not only as a summary of his personal experience but also as an echo of his Israelite ancestors’ 38 years in the wilderness, “waiting” to enter the waters of the Jordan River to reach the Promised Land?

If so, was Jesus really asking the unwell man whether he, unlike his Hebrew ancestors, was ready to surrender fully to God’s will in order to experience that longed-for healing? And was he ready to stop the “it’s not my fault” self-talk in an attempt to explain his malady? Jesus does not address the man’s attempt to account for his situation. Instead, He utters a brief command: “Stand up, pick up your bedroll, and start walking!” (v. 8).

Stand up and start walking

The command “Stand up, pick up your bedroll, and start walking!” has a sacred history. Jesus was quoting and adapting God’s command to “stand up and start walking” that He uttered at crucial moments in the history of the Hebrew people.

For instance, God twice commanded Abram to “stand up and start walking” toward the land that He had earlier promised to him and to his descendants as part of the formation of a new

people (Gen. 12:1; 13:17). God commanded Elijah to “stand up and start walking” to Zarephath near Sidon while famine devastated Israel (1 Kings 17:9, 10). He twice commanded Jeremiah to “stand up and start walking” to carry out his prophetic ministry (Jer. 13:6; 18:2). Ezekiel was commanded to “stand up and start walking” as God prepared him to speak to his fellow Hebrews in Babylonian exile (Ezek. 3:22). God directed Jonah two times to “stand up and start walking” to Nineveh, both before and after the detour in the belly of the big fish (Jonah 1:2; 3:2).

A protective hedge

This rich biblical background of Jesus’ command to the unwell man would have been familiar to him and those nearby who overheard it. Because of its biblical history, Jesus’ command would have been understood to carry a double message: First, be healed! Second, go on a God-assigned mission, testifying to the genuineness of your healing and to its Source—Jesus. The unwell man’s healing and his obedience to Jesus’ command were immediate: “The man was made well; he picked up his bedroll, and he started walking!” (v. 9a). And he lived healthily ever after? We are not told; the narrative turns our attention away from him to something else—the calendar: “It was Sabbath that day” (v. 9).

For Jewish people of Jesus’ day, especially in Jerusalem, life during Sabbath was controlled and micromanaged to a level of detail far beyond what God specified in Exodus 20:8–11. Why such micromanagement when the Sabbath commandment itself is relatively brief? This process began five centuries earlier, after the Babylonian captivity, when some of those captives and their offspring returned to their Judean homeland. Many acknowledged what the prophets had warned them about: their Babylonian captivity was due to the Hebrew people’s multigenerational indifference to God’s will as expressed in the Ten Commandments and related law, including the Sabbath.

In an effort, then, to prevent this tragedy from happening again, Jewish religious leaders developed a “hedge around the law” to guard against violations of the Ten Commandments. If enough detailed regulations were in place, like a protective hedge, they would help ensure that the people did not violate those laws. That was the idea, anyway. This expanding hedge of regulations was transmitted orally from generation to generation and, eventually, was preserved in writing, the Mishnah,⁵ about a century after Jesus.

The Sabbath hedge?

How this detailed “hedge around the law” attempted to protect the fourth commandment is seen in its list of 39 kinds of “work” prohibited on the Sabbath. The 39th of those prohibited Sabbath kinds of work is titled “one who carries out an object from domain to domain.”⁶ This distinction between “private domain” and “public domain” impacted most of the Mishnah’s Sabbath carrying restrictions. What a person was permitted to carry in a private home on the Sabbath would be prohibited in public. In other words, Mishnah law was directly involved when the newly healed man at the pool, at Jesus’ command, picked up his bed and carried it from the “private domain” of the pool’s portico into the “public domain” of the street.

Jewish rabbinic authorities disagreed about what could or could not be lawfully carried on Sabbath. For example, according to one, a Jew helping a Gentile lift a load onto his donkey on Friday afternoon would be guilty of breaking the Sabbath if that Gentile did not reach his destination and remove the load before Sabbath began. But others declared that the helpful Jew would not be guilty of breaking the Sabbath, even if the Gentile did not unload the donkey before Sabbath.⁷

Within this labyrinthine system of law, what about a man carrying his bed? Carrying a bed on Sabbath was permitted, so long as it was done by two persons “because neither performed a complete prohibited labor.”⁸ It was permitted on Sabbath to carry a sick person on a bed. Perhaps it was Sabbath when men carried a paralytic on a bed and lowered him through the roof into Jesus’ presence (Luke 5:18–20). If so, while the men did not break rabbinic Sabbath restrictions by carrying the paralytic, they certainly did when they hoisted him onto the roof, pulled away the tiles, and lowered him through the opening!

Had Jesus directed a disciple or bystander to help the healed man carry his bed, Jesus’ opponents would have had no ground for accusing the man of Sabbath breaking. But Jesus instructed him to carry it himself, without help. Jesus’ opponents would have been waiting in anticipation for the healed man, carrying his bed, to leave the “domain” of the portico and step into the “domain” of the street. That first step onto the street, according to Mishnah law, broke the Sabbath. As soon as the healed man stepped onto the street, they confronted him: “It is Sabbath, so it is not lawful for you to carry your bed” (John 5:10)!

Breaking or freeing the Sabbath?

In this context, then, we come to the question implied in the title: When Jesus commanded the healed man to pick up his bed and start walking, was Jesus *breaking* the Sabbath or *setting free* the Sabbath?

When read in the light of its linguistic, social, and religious contexts, John 5:18 declares that by healing the crippled man and sending him on his way, carrying his bed as a witness to the extent of God’s healing power—Jesus was not *breaking* the Sabbath. Rather, by “doing these things on the Sabbath” (v. 16), Jesus was *setting free* the Sabbath from an unbiblical, unhelpful, anxiety-producing, man-made restriction. In addition to *setting free* the Sabbath, Jesus also reissued God’s ancient command to His people to “stand up and start walking” to carry out the mission that He assigned them.

If this argument is correct, then the common translations of John 5:18, about Jesus “breaking the Sabbath” (which, if true, would have serious consequences for Christian theology), unfortunately miss the point of the text completely.⁹



- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are the author’s own translations.
- 2 Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), abbreviated BDAG.
- 3 BDAG, s.v. “*luō*.”
- 4 In some ancient manuscripts, the pool is named “Bethesda” and in others “Bethsaida.”
- 5 Mishnah quotations and explanations are from the Sefaria website, https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shabbat.
- 6 Mishnah *Shabbat* 7:2.
- 7 Mishnah *Shabbat* 1:7.
- 8 Mishnah *Shabbat* 10:5.
- 9 *Editor’s note:* The Common English Bible reads, “For this reason the Jewish leaders wanted even more to kill him—not only because he was doing away with the Sabbath . . .” (John 5:18). This clearly was not Jesus’ mission, as He stated, “Don’t even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven’t come to do away with them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17, CEB). The Amplified Bible reads, “This made the Jews more determined than ever to kill Him, for not only was He breaking the Sabbath [from their viewpoint] . . .” (John 5:18, AMP, parenthesis included). The Expanded Bible ends the verse with this parenthetical statement: “Both breaking the Sabbath and blasphemy against God were punishable by death; Ex. 35:2; Lev. 24:16” (John 5:18). Jesus was either guilty of both—or neither.

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