

John 7:21-24

“Judging With Righteous Judgment for a Sabbath Healing”

“Yeshua answered them, ‘I did one deed, and you all marvel. For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on *the* Sabbath you circumcise a man. If a man receives circumcision on *the* Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on *the* Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.’”

7:21 The dialogue between Yeshua the Messiah and various Jewish religious leaders, in John 7:21-24, is widely recognized as taking place in response to His healing on the Sabbath in John 5:1-18 previously. This interchange occurred during the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot* (7:2), but it is not stated how much time elapsed from the healing at the Pool of Bethesda to this point. What readers know for certain, is that knowledge of this healing has gotten out. There is a great deal of tension present against the Lord, including various threats against Him (7:1, 19) and Yeshua actually being accused of being demon possessed (7:20).

Yeshua directed to His detractors, “I did one work, and you were all astonished” (Common English Bible), *hen ergon epoiēsa* (ἐν ἔργον ἐποίησα) rendered by the NIV as “I did one miracle.” While marveling, being astonished, or being amazed were doubtlessly emotions present among those who heard about Yeshua’s healing on the Sabbath—the Good News Bible perhaps captures what is really in view: “you were all surprised.” Indeed, the discussion that Yeshua has is all about whether or not He can actually heal someone on the Sabbath. Some are apparently surprised that this would even be possible for someone in obedience to the Torah.

7:22 Yeshua explains His activity of healing the invalid on the Sabbath, by making light of an action that was regularly performed by Torah obedient Jews on the Sabbath. He asserts, “Because Moses has given you circumcision (though it is not from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a man [do a boy’s *b’rit-milah*, CJB] on *Shabbat*” (TLV). The Torah included clear instructions regarding circumcision (Exodus 12:44, 48), but most especially the direction, “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: ‘When a woman gives birth and bears a male *child*, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised’” (Leviticus 12:2-3). Yeshua makes the further point to indicate that the rite of circumcision went back to the time before Moses (Genesis 17:10-12), which can only serve to highlight its importance for descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The rite of circumcising an infant male on the eighth day was something that observant Jews of the Second Temple period took so seriously, that rather than delay it to the ninth day, should the eighth day actually occur on *Shabbat*, an infant male was to be circumcised. Yeshua’s logic of healing an invalid on *Shabbat* works via a lesser to greater argument: if a small piece of flesh can be cut off of a male infant in obedience to a Torah commandment on *Shabbat*, then why should there be an issue with performing an act of mercy to those in need? A statement later appearing in the Talmud actually demonstrates the thought of various religious Jews on how it was absolutely permitted to be concerned with the wellness of the whole body on *Shabbat*, if circumcision can be attended to on *Shabbat*:

“R. Eleazar responded and said, ‘If circumcision, which concerns only one of the two hundred and forty-eight limbs of the body, overrides the restrictions of the Sabbath, all the more so the whole of the body’s [salvation] should override the restrictions of the Sabbath’” (b. *Yoma* 85b).¹

J. Ramsey Michaels interjects his observation that “The difference is that the rabbis confined the principle to immediately life-threatening situations, while Jesus applied it on behalf of anyone in need of help or healing (cf., e.g., Matt. 12:1-8, 9-14; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6).”² What should be highlighted to our attention, though, is that Yeshua healing a man on the Sabbath, fell well within

¹ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

² J. Ramsey Michaels, *New International Biblical Commentary: John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 130.

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the intramural discussions, debates, and reasoning processes of the theological traditions of Second Temple Judaism.³ Yeshua the Messiah, making someone better on the Sabbath, was not something that had not been discussed among various Jewish teachers and experts on the Hebrew Scriptures.

7:23 Yeshua questions His detractors, "If a man receives circumcision on *Shabbat* so that the Torah of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry that I healed a man's whole body on *Shabbat*?" (TLV). That the command of Leviticus 12:3 to circumcise an infant male was believed to override the restrictions of the Sabbath to not work, is something present in the Mishnah and Tosefta:

"And all things required for circumcision do they perform on the Sabbath.'...An operative principle did R. Aqiba state, 'Any sort of labor [in connection with circumcision] which it is possible to do on the eve of the Sabbath does not override [the restrictions of] the Sabbath, and that which it is not possible to do on the eve of the Sabbath does override [the prohibitions of] the Sabbath'" (m.*Shabbat* 18:3-19:1).⁴

"R. Yose says, 'Great is circumcision, since it overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath, which is subject to strict rules'" (m.*Nedarim* 3:11).⁵

"There are times that you must rest on the Sabbath, and times that you must not rest on the Sabbath.' R. Eliezer says, 'As to circumcision, on account of which they override the prohibitions of the Sabbath, why is this so? It is because they are liable to extirpation if it is not done on time'" (t.*Shabbat* 15:16).⁶

Yeshua makes light of how those criticizing Him, various Jewish leaders, would make every effort to circumcise an infant male on the Sabbath, specifically so the Torah or Law of Moses would not be broken. V. 23 employs the verb *luō* (λύω) to describe this action, which can broadly mean "To loose, loosen what is fast, bound, meaning to unbind, untie," although here more in the context "of a law or institution, to loosen its obligation, i.e., either to make void, or to do away...or to break, to violate" (AMG).⁷ While most commonly rendered as "broken," the clause *luthē ho nomos Mōuseōs* (λυθῆ ὁ νόμος Μωϋσέως) can also be rendered as "loosen the Law of Moses"⁸ or "circumvent the Torah of Moses" (Power New Testament). The ideology of Yeshua the Messiah, in terms of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, was decisively that the Sabbath was made for the wellness and wholeness of human people (Mark 2:27-28), and so He uses the permitted circumcision of a male infant on *Shabbat* as a basis to heal those who were hurting.

While some examiners will think that in the scene of John 7:21-24 there is some dynamic of the Sabbath typology being fulfilled in the Messiah, thus leading toward the abolition of the Torah institutions of circumcision and the Sabbath⁹—what is instead properly concluded is that Yeshua's miraculous healing being performed on the Sabbath, is fully consistent with the presumed "work" that is performed by Torah obedient Jews on the Sabbath. While those Jewish rabbis might, from an uninformed person's vantage point, technically be considered to "break" the Sabbath by circumcising an infant male, they in actuality are doing no such thing. And so, Yeshua naturally takes things a little further—His statements on healing the whole human body actually sitting well within the Jewish jurisprudence of *halachic* deliberation.

A selection of Christian examiners on this passage, who would not necessarily conclude that the seventh-day Sabbath is to be observed in the post-resurrection era, do properly recognize that Yeshua's statements in John 7:21-24 are hardly anti-Sabbath:

³ Cf. Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, pp 83-87.

⁴ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 202.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁶ Neusner, *Tosefta*, 1:418.

⁷ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), pp 931, 932.

⁸ "that the Torah of Moses may not be loosened" (PME).

⁹ Carson, pp 315-316 comes rather close to this.

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- Leon Morris: "He was not arguing simply that a repressive law be liberalized. Nor did He adopt an anti-sabbatarian attitude, opposing the whole institution. Had they understood the implications of the Mosaic provision for circumcision on the sabbath they would have seen that deeds of mercy such as He had just done were not merely permissible but obligatory. Moses quite understood that some things should be done even on the sabbath."¹⁰
- Colin G. Kruse: "Jesus asked why, if they circumcised children on the sabbath, were they angry with him for healing a whole man on the sabbath (cf. 5:16-18)? Jewish scholars used a similar argument in defence of actions necessary to preserve the life of the whole person, which was more important than circumcision, which affects only one member. Jesus applied their principle more widely—to healing people's whole bodies even when they were not in immediate danger of death."¹¹
- Gail R. O'Day: "In v. 23, Jesus employs a common rabbinic form of argumentation to argue from the lesser (circumcision) to the greater (healing); if one part of the body can be tended to on the sabbath in order to ensure a man's wholeness, why should the healing of the whole body not be possible? Verse 23 makes clear that Jesus' sabbath healing was not performed in order to overturn or break the sabbath law (cf. 5:18)..."¹²

More broadly to be noted, would include the conclusion of Bruce Milne, who states, "His action was in fullest accord with the healing and redeeming purposes which lie at the heart of the old covenant {likely meaning: the Hebrew Bible, Tanach, Old Testament}. Thus, far from being the enemy of Judaism and the law, Jesus is, in fact, the one in whom the historic purpose of Judaism is affirmed by being fulfilled."¹³

Also not to be overlooked is the statement of Gary M. Burge:

"Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater, using circumcision as a precedent. Jesus sees himself not simply liberalizing the law but fulfilling what the law was meant to do: to bring renewal and redemption to God's people."¹⁴

The most all-encompassing of statements issued by commentators might be that of Craig S. Keener, who draws out the argumentation of Yeshua in conjunction with not just Jewish theological discussions and various bodies of ancient literature, but Mediterranean philosophizing in general:

"As most commentators recognize, Jesus...concludes with a *qal vahomer* (light to heavy) argument (7:23). Such arguments are quite prominent throughout Tannaitic discussions like those reported in the *Tosefta*, *Mekilta*, *Sipra Leviticus*, *Sipre on Numbers*, and *Sipre on Deuteronomy*. Although called 'Hillelite,' this interpretive rule had already long been part of ancient Mediterranean reasoning. Jesus' argument runs like this: if the Sabbath could be superseded for (excising) a single member, how much for (restoring) the whole person (cf. Mark 3:4)? Exactly this form of reasoning appears in a tradition of sages contemporary with John: if the Sabbath supersedes circumcision, which affects a single member, how much more does one's life, which affects all one's members, supersede it? That protecting life took precedence over the Sabbath was a long-standing Jewish tradition."¹⁵

7:24 Yeshua the Messiah is no Sabbath breaker, nor has He facilitated some fragrant violation of Moses' Teaching. But what Yeshua the Messiah is concerned about are the weightier imperatives of justice and righteousness, surely upheld by Moses' Teaching, but frequently overlooked by various Jewish religious leaders He would encounter (Matthew 23:23; cf. John 5:39-40). Yeshua would direct, "Stop judging by surface appearances, and judge the right way!" (CJB), "Look beneath the surface so you can judge correctly" (NLT), or even "You must not judge by the appearance of

¹⁰ Morris, *John*, 409.

¹¹ Kruse, *John*, 187.

¹² O'Day, in *NIB*, 9:620.

¹³ Milne, 119.

¹⁴ Gary M. Burge, *NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 224.

¹⁵ Keener, *John*, 1:716-717.

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things but by the reality!” (Phillips New Testament). O’Day draws the astute conclusion, “To the Jewish authorities, Jesus’ healing appeared to be a violation of sabbath law, but in reality, when viewed with right judgment, it was a deepening fulfillment of the sabbath.”¹⁶

John 7:21-24 application What has been witnessed among some of the writings on John 7:21-24 by Messianic commentators, has been relatively consistent with Christian commentators, who do not conclude that Yeshua the Messiah was at all breaking the Sabbath by healing an invalid. What has been seen, is a rightful emphasis on Yeshua’s attention on the human wholeness dimension of *Shabbat*, that His conclusion of it being permitted to heal if it was also permitted to circumcise sat well within *halachic* deliberations on *Shabbat*, but also the assertion that Yeshua did not consider man-made regulations about *Shabbat* to be inflexible and Divinely mandated.

In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David H. Stern draws out how “if the eighth day of a boy’s life falls on *Shabbat*, is circumcision to be put off till the ninth day, or is *Shabbat* to be broken by doing the work of tool-carrying and cutting needed for the operation? The Judeans (the Jewish religious authorities centered in Judea; see 1:19N) of Yeshua time had already decided the question, and their decision stands on record in the Talmud...{proceeding to quote from his *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, 159 and b.*Yoma* 85b}...”¹⁷ He further observes, “These verses of Yochanan [John] are important because they prove that Yeshua did not oppose the Pharisees’ tradition *per se*. He was not against legislation needed to apply the *Torah* to particular times and circumstances, but against attributing to that legislation inspiration by God (Mk 7:5-13&N).”¹⁸

A similar conclusion is drawn by Joel Liberman in his commentary on John:

“Each male infant in Israel was to be circumcised at eight days old, and if the eighth day coincided with the Sabbath, the law of circumcision took precedence over the Sabbath law: the child was circumcised. You see, the conflict arose from the fact that cutting and carrying the tools needed to perform the circumcision are kinds of work forbidden by the rabbis on *Shabbat*. Yet, they decided if the eighth day fell on *Shabbat*, one does the necessary work and circumcises the boy...{quoting b.*Yoma* 85b}...Yeshua did not always oppose the tradition of the *P’rushim* [Pharisees], like what we hear much of the time! He was not against legislation needed to apply the *Torah* to particular times and circumstances, but He was against attributing that legislation to the status of ‘holy writ.’”¹⁹

The discussion of John 7:21-24, with Yeshua validating His Sabbath healing by drawing attention to the permissible circumcision of a male infant on *Shabbat*, sits well within the normative Judaism of the Second Temple period. While Yeshua was prone, at times, to dismiss various customs and traditions of His contemporaries and the Jewish religious leadership—He did not always do this! The scene of John 7:21-24 necessarily directs Bible readers to not just haphazardly dismiss various conflicts that the Messiah has, as involving “traditions of men,” but instead points us to considering each scene on a case-by-case basis, and evaluate the details as they have been deliberated upon by various commentators and examiners.

¹⁶ O’Day, in *NIB*, 9:620.

¹⁷ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 177.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁹ Liberman and Murphy, pp 113-114.