

John 9:1-16

“Yeshua Accused of Violating the Sabbath”

“As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’ Yeshua answered, ‘It was neither *that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* so that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.’ When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came *back* seeing. Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, ‘Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?’ Others were saying, ‘This is he,’ *still* others were saying, ‘No, but he is like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the one.’ So they were saying to him, ‘How then were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man who is called Yeshua made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash”; so I went away and washed, and I received sight.’ They said to him, ‘Where is He?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’ They brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Yeshua made the clay and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, ‘He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see.’ Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, ‘This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others were saying, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And there was a division among them.”

Given His previous assertion in John 8:12, “I am the Light of the world,” it should not be too surprising that in John 9:1-16 following that the Messiah heals a blind man at the Pool of Siloam. The record of the Gospels surely indicates that Yeshua the Messiah frequently healed blind people (Matthew 9:27-31; 12:22-23; 15:30; 20:29-34; 21:14; et. al.). Yeshua restoring the sight of blind people was indeed an important Messianic activity predicted in the Tanach (Isaiah 29:18; 35:5; 42:7).

In the healing of blindness recorded in John 9:1-16, is Yeshua guilty of breaking the Sabbath? A passage like John 9:1-16 is the kind that you can see various Christian people just list off—with the conclusion drawn that the Messiah broke the Torah, the Sabbath, and had every intention of abolishing everything of the presumed “previous order”—even though no real examination of what has taken place in this scene is conducted. Gary M. Burge’s remarks in the *NIV Application Commentary* volume on John do not really explore whether or not Yeshua violated the Sabbath in a Biblical sense. His commentary only asks the questions, “*Was Jesus a sinner? Does his Sabbath violation invalidate his claims?*”¹

John 9:1-16 is actually a passage where there are some important background opinions to be evaluated. That the Messiah healed a man of blindness, is a great miracle which was noticed by many. At the same time, there were ancient Jewish debates over whether it was permitted to apply salve to one’s eyes, or receive forms of medical treatment on the eyes, on *Shabbat*. Some of these discussions were likely present during the time of Yeshua, and were most especially present in later periods. Yeshua’s healing of the blind man, and His application of a mud-paste in the healing process, certainly did not violate later Sabbath *halachah*. Not at all to be overlooked, is how the Pharisees who heard of this healing, were internally divided (9:16).

9:1-2 Yeshua has just left the Temple complex in Jerusalem (8:58), with the narration of His encounter with a blind man beginning: “As Yeshua passed along, he saw a man blind from birth. His *talmidim* asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned—this man or his parents—to cause him to be born blind?’” (CJB).

While there is a general influence of sin which has been unleashed upon the human race (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12), how specific is the influence of sin upon particular people? Exodus 20:5 decrees how, “for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me.” Exodus 34:7 also states, “He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” Psalm 51:4 further indicates, “Behold,

¹ Burge, 278.

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I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.” There were some discussions in Second Temple Judaism about the possibility of a child sinning before birth, given the Genesis 25:22 scene of Rebekah’s twins wrestling in the womb. In the Talmud, the thoughts are witnessed,

“Said R. Ammi, ‘Death comes about only through sin, and suffering only through transgression. Death comes about only through sin: The soul that sins, it shall die; the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him’ (Eze. 18:20)” (b.*Shabbat* 55a).²

It is safe to say that the Disciples’ question about the blindness of the individual they encounter, was rooted in a widespread belief that physical ailments frequently came as a consequence of a previous generation’s sin.

9:3 While there are cases in which a past generation’s sins will be manifested in the physical disposition of their descendants, this is not a hard and fast rule. Suffering does not always come as a result or as a consequence of personal or ancestral sin (Luke 13:2-3; 2 Corinthians 12:7; Galatians 4:13). Yeshua is clear to direct, “His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents’ sins. He is blind so that God’s power might be seen at work in him” (Good News Bible). God’s own providence is the source of the man’s blindness.

9:4-5 Yeshua tells His Disciples to focus on the tasks at hand, in the statement, “It behooves Me to work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day. Night comes when no one is able to work” (v. 4, LITV). He further asserts, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (v. 5, NIV). The contrast between day and night, is widely and rightfully concluded by examiners to represent a contrast between the period of Yeshua’s ministry, and the forthcoming period of His death. As the time is available to them to do important things, the Messiah and His Disciples need to do them.

9:6 One would assume that when encountering an individual in need of a healing, that Yeshua would just touch him or her, and then pronounce some kind of “You are healed!” statement. This is not what we see with the blind man in this scene. It seems somewhat out of place when we encounter the word, “he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes” (NIV). Yeshua made a mud-paste out of spittle, and rubbed it into the blind man’s eyes. Why did He do this? There were certainly debates over the curative properties of saliva in Second Temple Judaism, with the thought recorded in the Talmud that the spit of a firstborn had healing abilities:

“Someone came before R. Hanina. He said to him, ‘I am certain that that man is a firstborn.’ He said to him, ‘How do you know?’ ‘Because when people would come to his father, he would say to them, ‘Go to my son, Shikhat, for he is firstborn, and his spit heals.’ ‘But maybe he was firstborn of the mother, since the firstborn of the mother.’ ‘We have a tradition that as to the firstborn of the father, his spit heals, but the spit of the firstborn of the mother doesn’t heal’” (b.*Bava Batra* 126b).³

The scene of Yeshua making a mud-paste out of His saliva, is not the only witnessed in the Gospels where this bodily fluid was used by Him (Mark 7:33; 8:22-25). Ben Witherington III notes how “Spittle was widely thought of as having medicinal qualities; many early Jews thought this (y. *Shabb.* 14, 14d, 17f.). In short, this story if heard by a Gentile audience would have singled out Jesus as a very special person and miracle worker; if heard by a Jew, as probably the Messiah, and definitely one uniquely endowed with divine power.”⁴ D.A. Carson goes a little further, and addresses the view of how in many cultures, bodily fluids and excretions were widely viewed as

² *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Witherington, *John*, 181.

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being unclean pollutants—but also how used in the right manner, could actually be turned around and be employed as healing agents:

“Palestinian Jews, like people in many other cultures around the world, believed that human excreta (including urine, breast milk, saliva, menstrual flow, *etc.*) were all forms of (ceremonial) pollutant, ‘dirt’. In such tribes, under certain conditions that same ‘dirt’, in the hands of people authorized with the appropriate power, could be transformed into an instrument of blessing. Thus blood and saliva pollute, but in the right context blood cleanses and saliva cures. Certainly uncleanness in the Old Testament can be conveyed by saliva (Lv. 15:8). If the reversal of the taboos also applies (and here the evidence is admittedly scanty), then by using spittle as part of his treatment Jesus is making a claim to have religious authority. The situation is not entirely unlike the healing of a man with leprosy: by touching him Jesus does not contract the leper’s uncleanness, but heals the leper of his disease (Mt. 8:1-4).”⁵

The usage of saliva was eventually prohibited by many Rabbis, because of a widespread usage of it in paganism:

“Abba Saul says in the name of R. ‘Aqiba, ‘Also *he who whispers over a wound, ‘It is written, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I have put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you’* (Ex. 15:26) [M. San. 10:1F], and who [then] spits, has no portion in the world to come” (t.*Sanhedrin* 12:10).⁶

More concerned with the scene of Yeshua having made a mud-paste, and anointing the eyes of a blind man, are Jewish discussions about whether or not it was permissible on the Sabbath to use eye salve. The Talmud indeed does record an opinion that to use eye salve on the Sabbath was permissible:

“Said Mar Uqba said Samuel, ‘A person may soak collyrium [eye salve] on the eve of the Sabbath and on the Sabbath put it on his eyes, without scruple” (b.*Shabbat* 108a).⁷

But why did Yeshua make a mud-paste here for the blind individual? In Mark 8:22-25,⁸ it is witnessed that all He did was rub saliva into the eyes of a blind man at Bethsaida. Many have thought that there is a connection to be made between the mud-paste and an act of re-creation, per the thrust of Genesis 2:7, “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground...”

9:7 Yeshua’s direction to the blind man was for him to go wash off the mud-paste that He had put on his eyes in the Pool of Siloam. That there is likely some kind of a word-play intended between the place name, the individual’s action, and Yeshua’s mission, has been detected by various examiners. As v. 7 appears in the CJB, “Go, wash off in the Pool of Shiloach!’ (The name means ‘sent.’) So he went and washed and came away seeing.” A lexicon like *Thayer* notes the following for the Greek transliteration *Silōam* (Σιλωάμ):

“Hebrew שִׁלּוּחַ [*Shiloach*], Isa. 8:6, which in John 9:7 is translated ἀπεσταλμένος [*apestalmenos*], but more correctly (see below) ‘a sending out,’ ‘gushing forth’ (of water); it is formed after the

⁵ Carson, 364; also Köstenberger, 283.

⁶ Neusner, *Tosefta*, 2:1187.

The kinds of factors, which likely involved the widescale eschewal of using saliva in Jewish medicine, might be those summarized by Pliny the Elder:

“I shall begin with man’s earnest search for help for himself from himself, in which we are immediately confronted with a major problem. People think it extremely effective to suck warm, living blood from a man and, putting their lips to the wound, to drain his very life—but men are not in the habit of putting their mouths to the wounds of wild animals! Our own reaction is one of revulsion when we see wild beasts drinking blood. Others seek to obtain bone-marrow from legs, and brains from infants” (*Natural History* 28.4; Pliny the Elder: *Pliny the Elder: Natural History*, trans. John F. Healy [London: Penguin Books, 1991], 251).

⁷ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

⁸ “Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ And he looked up and said, ‘I see men, for I see *them* like trees, walking around.’ Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and *began* to see everything clearly” (Mark 8:22-25).

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analogy of אִי־בּ [iyivov], 'had in hatred', 'persecuted', from אִי־בּ; יְלוּד [yilod; ayav], 'born', from יָלַד [yalad], 'to bring forth.'⁹

ABD details how "Siloam, and its related forms (Heb *silōah* [שִׁלּוֹחַ] [Isa 8:6]; *šelah* [שֶׁלַח] [Neh 3:15]) probably applied originally to the earliest reservoir, and later to any other reservoirs which collected water from the channels or aqueducts on the W side of the Kidron valley. It also referred to an area apparently near the reservoirs as reflected in 'the tower of Siloam' (Luke 13:4)."¹⁰ Further described in the *ABD* entry is "Siloam in the Roman Period," which is partially concerned with John 9:7:

"Of the two references to Siloam in the NT, John 9:7 simply states that Jesus sent the blind man to 'wash in the Pool of Siloam,' giving the impression that the pool was a well-known landmark. Josephus (*JW* 5.4.2 § 145) specifically calls Siloam a *pēgē* [πηγή], a 'fountain,' [not a spring; Siloam received its water from the Gihon] and indicates it was at the S end of the Tyropoeon valley. This would place it in the vicinity of either the Lower, Old (earlier) Pool or at the nearby Upper Pool which Hezekiah made, the modern Pool of Siloam. There is, however, a difference of opinion as to which pool Josephus means. In the other reference, Luke 13:4, we are told that there was a tower in a place called 'the Siloam' (Gk. *toi Silōam* [τῶ Σιλωάμ]), with the implication that everyone knew of its location. Presumably it was built on the S end of the ridge of the old City of David, just above the pool of the same name.

"At the Lower, Old Pool some remains of a Herodian bath have been found. The Talmud (*Sukk.* 4.9) states that at the Feast of Tabernacles, water was taken in a golden vessel from the Pool of Siloam to the Water Gate and carried in the procession up to the Temple and the altar. In reference to the ceremonies at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7:37-38 Jesus, in speaking about his dispensing 'streams of living water,' may be comparing his activity with this ceremony of carrying the water from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple."¹¹

While there are important etymological and archaeological considerations to be made regarding the Pool of Siloam, examiners tend to focus on how v. 6 focuses on the translation of Siloam or *Shiloach* as "sent." This is often connected to what the blind man is told to do, and what the Messiah Himself was sent from the Father to do. In the estimation of F.F. Bruce,

"Siloam...means 'sent'—the Hebrew form *shilōah* (as in 'the waters of Shiloah that flow gently' of Isa. 8:6) is patently derived from the verb *shālāh* 'sent'—and it speaks of Jesus, the sent one (Gk. *apostalmenos*) of God, who alone is qualified to impart inward illumination. Without question, the man did as he was told: he went and washed the paste off his eyes in the pool of Siloam, and found himself able to see for the first time in his life."¹²

Colin G. Kruse similarly concludes, "Perhaps the evangelist added this explanation to connect the name of the Pool with the fact that Jesus sent the man there to wash, so as to make clear that the miracle occurred because Jesus sent him, not because of any healing qualities in the water itself."¹³ And, Burge offers the further observation of how "More than twenty times in this Gospel, Jesus is described as the one who has been 'sent' by God (e.g., 4:34; 5:23, 37; 7:28; 8:26; 12:44; 14:24). In other words, the blind man is being told to go and wash in the place called 'sent,' by the One who was 'sent' by God. Jesus then, is the source of his healing, not the pool."¹⁴

Recognizing how the water pouring rites for the Feast of Tabernacles involved the water at Siloam (7:37-39),¹⁵ with Yeshua Himself being the One in whom true refreshment is found, is surely important when the source of such water is where the blind man is told to go wash off the mud-paste applied to his eyes. The thought of Gail R. O'Day is, "Jesus is the source of Tabernacles fulfillment, not the traditional Jewish rites."¹⁶ Craig S. Keener more fully explains,

⁹ Thayer, 575.

¹⁰ W. Harold Mare, "Siloam, Pool of," in *ABD*, 6:24.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6:25.

¹² Bruce, *John*, 210.

¹³ Kruse, *John*, 222.

¹⁴ Burge, 273.

¹⁵ This, among other customs, is detailed in the article "A Summarization of Sukkot Traditions," appearing in the *Messianic Fall Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

¹⁶ O'Day, in *NIB*, 9:654.

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"Most importantly, the renowned ritual of water-drawing at the festival of Tabernacles drew water from the Pool of Siloam; because no clear break exists between chs. 7 and 8 on the one hand and 9:1-10:21, Jesus uses the water that at this festival would be deemed particularly holy. Yet as the Pool of Bethesda could not heal (5:5-6), so neither can this water heal by itself, but only because Jesus has 'sent' someone there. Because Jesus sends the man to this pool, it becomes clear that John does not oppose ritual water (e.g., 2:6; 3:25) per se; it is just that the traditional rituals of his Jewish heritage are not efficacious apart from an encounter with Jesus."¹⁷

Many readers of v. 6 just gloss over the place name of Siloam, and move immediately to considering the action of the blind man who has had a mud-paste smeared over his eyes. Merrill C. Tenney, for example, interjects how at this point, "Even if he had not faith to believe that healing was imminent, he would at least want to wash the clay from his eyes. Perhaps the clay was used not because of any medicinal qualities, but rather to provide the man with a tangible evidence of Jesus' intent."¹⁸

9:8-10 Although not stated directly, it is deduced that the blind man went to the Pool of Siloam, and was healed of his blindness. "The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, 'Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?'" (v. 8, RSV). There is some perplexity as to what has happened. "Others were saying, 'This is he,' still others were saying, 'No, but he is like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the one'" (v. 9). Tenney appropriately observes, "The cure was undeniable. Nobody who knew the man, whether disciples, neighbors, parents, ecclesiastics, or the rank and file of the multitude, challenged its reality...Neither error nor fraud could be detected."¹⁹

The question persisted, "How then were your eyes opened?" (v. 10), or "How are you now able to see?" (Common English Bible). Keener astutely indicates how "The healed man's neighbors recognize that, if this is the man they knew (9:9), he must have been healed somehow, for he had certainly been blind. This point underlines the credibility of the healing; even those without commitment to Jesus could recognize that a positive miracle had taken place."²⁰

9:11-12 When asked about how he was healed from his blindness, "He answered, 'The Man who is called Yeshua made mud, rubbed it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went away and washed, and then I received my sight!" (v. 11, TLV). It is further asked, "Where is this man?" to which "He replied, 'I don't know'" (v. 12, Common English Bible).

9:13-14 In order to figure out exactly what had happened, "They took the man who had been blind to the *P'rushim*" (v. 13, CJB) or Pharisees. Some controversy was bound to arise, because "Now the day was *Shabbat* when Yeshua made the mud and opened the man's eyes" (v. 14, TLV). It is to be recognized *ton pēlon epoiēsen ho Iēsous* (τὸν πηλὸν ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς), "the clay made – Jesus" (Brown and Comfort),²¹ with the making of a mud-paste or salve to anoint the blind man's eyes likely violating the stipulation of "knead[ing]" (m.*Shabbat* 7:2)²² on the Sabbath, and perhaps also, mixing, on the Sabbath: "They put water into the bran, but they do not knead it" (m.*Shabbat* 24:3).²³ In this case, the preparation of a medicinal agent for healing, may have been a violation of traditional Jewish Sabbath *halachah*. But, it is to be noted from some Talmudic discussions, that there was, in least in a later period, divided opinion over whether or not it was permitted to anoint eyes on the Sabbath:

"Said R. Zutra b. Tobiah said Rab, 'In the case of an eye that got out of order, it is permitted to paint it on the Sabbath.' People supposed that that rule applied when the medicine had been ground on the prior day, but if it was necessary to grind the medicine on the Sabbath and carry it on the public domain, it would not be

¹⁷ Keener, *John*, 1:781-782.

¹⁸ Tenney, 157.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Keener, *John*, 1:783.

²¹ Brown and Comfort, 357.

²² Neusner, *Mishnah*, 187.

²³ Ibid., 207.

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permitted. However, said one of the rabbis, named R. Jacob, "To me personally did R. Judah explain that even grinding the medicine on the Sabbath and even carrying it through public domain are permitted." R. Judah permitted painting the eye on the Sabbath. Said R. Samuel bar Judah to them, "Anyone who pays attention to Judah profanes the Sabbath." It turned out that he had some eye trouble. He sent word to R. Judah, "Is healing on the Sabbath permitted or forbidden?" He replied, "To everybody else it is permitted, but to you it is forbidden." But was it on my own account that I made that statement? It derived from Mar Samuel. Mar Samuel had an inflamed eye on the Sabbath; she cried but no one paid any attention to her, so her eye dropped. On the next day, Mar Samuel went out and expounded: "In the case of an eye that got out of order, it is permitted to paint it on the Sabbath. What is the operative consideration? Eyesight [Mishcon:] is connected with the mental faculties." [As to eye trouble that may be treated on the Sabbath,] what sort is permitted in that connection? Said R. Judah, "[Mishcon:] Discharge, pricking, congestion, watering, inflammation or the first stages of sickness, excluding the last stage of sickness or the brightening of the eyesight, in which instances it is not permitted." Said R. Judah, "The wasp's sting, the thorn's prick, an abscess, a sore eye, or an inflammation — for all of these a bathhouse is dangerous. Radishes are good for fever, beets for cold shivers; the reverse is dangerous. Warm things are good for a scorpion bite, cold things for a wasp sting; the reverse is dangerous. So, too, warm things for a thorn prick and cold things for an eruption. The reverse is dangerous. Vinegar is good after letting blood, small fish in brine after fasting; the reverse is dangerous. Cress after bloodletting is dangerous. Fever is dangerous for bloodletting, so sore eyes are dangerous for bloodletting. The second day after eating fish is good for bloodletting; the second day after bloodletting is good for eating fish; on the third day it is injurious" (b.Avodah Zarah 28b).²⁴

9:15-16 The formerly blind man is asked about how he received his healing, and so he is straight and to the point, as v. 15 details: "So the *P'rushim* asked him again how he had become able to see; and he told them, 'He put mud on my eyes, then I washed, and now I can see'" (CJB). From the text of v. 16 following, readers should easily see how there was a division among these Pharisees, with some concluding that Yeshua was in violation of the Sabbath, while others having to genuinely weigh the importance of the healing of the blind man:

"So some of the Pharisees began saying, 'This man isn't from God, because He doesn't keep *Shabbat!*' But others were saying, 'How can a sinner perform such signs?' So there was a split among them" (TLV).

One of the most serious factors that the Jewish religious leaders would have had to weigh, upon hearing about some of the miraculous works of Yeshua of Nazareth, would be to evaluate whether He was, or was not, to be classified as a false prophet. Deuteronomy 12:1-5²⁵ had warned Ancient Israel about the presence of figures who would come and perform mighty acts, deceiving the population, and hence taking people away from the One True God. However, in healing a blind man, what Yeshua had performed was a decisive act of mercy. And, that there were some Pharisees stating, "But how can a sinner give such wonderful signs as these?" (Phillips New Testament), demonstrated a fairness and a willingness to explore what was really taking place—which needs to be factually recognized as not all Pharisees being enemies and antagonists of the Lord.

Various commentators do indeed recognize how for v. 16, that Yeshua the Messiah did not strictly violate Biblical proscriptions for *Shabbat*, and indeed that various Pharisees were led to consider Him as an important figure:

- Leon Morris: "The man's statement divides the Pharisees. The more doctrinaire seize on the breach of the sabbath as they saw it. If a man did not keep the sabbath according to their understanding of sabbath-keeping he could not possibly be from God. It was as simple as that. Others, however, were more open-minded. They took

²⁴ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

²⁵ "These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. You shall not act like this toward the LORD your God. But you shall seek *the LORD* at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come" (Deuteronomy 12:1-5).

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their stand on another principle, a principle neatly stated by the formerly blind man in v. 31.”²⁶

- F.F. Bruce: “As the crowd was divided in John 7:43, so the Pharisees are now divided over Jesus’ credentials. Adolf Schlatter, who was no mean authority in rabbinical scholarship, thought that the division followed the tendencies attributed respectively to the schools of Shammai and Hillel. The school of Shammai tended to argue from first principles (so here: anyone who breaks the law is a sinner); the school of Hillel tended to have regard to the established facts of a case (so here: Jesus has performed a good work). In a case like this, their conclusions were bound to conflict with each other.”²⁷
- Bruce Milne: “From the strictest Pharisaical standpoint, Jesus had infringed the Sabbath tradition (not Scripture!) at two, probably three, points. First he had healed on the Sabbath, which was permissible only when life was in danger. Patently it was not so in this case. Second, in making the mud he had kneaded on the Sabbath, which was specifically forbidden. Third, he had anointed the man’s eyes, which the stricter teachers also proscribed.”²⁸
- Craig S. Keener: “Historically, some Pharisees (of the school of Hillel) permitted prayer for the sick on the Sabbath. If the more lenient Hillelites would have permitted prayer on the Sabbath, the Shammaite school was probably dominant among Pharisees in Jesus’ day, though no longer in John’s. Yet most Pharisees probably would have opposed making a clay poultice on the Sabbath for someone not in danger of dying (9:14). The procedure, more than the healing act itself, would have violated Jesus’ contemporaries’ views.”²⁹

One who is definitely not favorable to a post-resurrection era continuance of God’s Torah, or the seventh-day Sabbath, is Witherington—who notably has to carefully choose his words about the scene here. He says,

“[I]nformal judicial proceedings of the inquiry-stage sort were being initiated against this man, because it was suspected that the Sabbath had been violated. The Pharisees are portrayed as divided, as was the original crowd (v. 16), only this time the division is over whether Jesus could be a man from God or not. On the one hand, it appeared Jesus violated the Sabbath. On the other hand, it is asked, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’”³⁰

V. 16 represents how there was a division or *schisma* (σχίσμα) among the Pharisees present, as to the identity and purposes of Yeshua of Nazareth. O’Day offers the general observation, “Some of the Pharisees...link this healing with other miraculous acts Jesus has performed...This schism among the Pharisees (v. 16c) echoes the divided response of the blind man’s neighbors...”³¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger more poignantly notes, “The fact that the Pharisees even care to ask the man what he thinks of Jesus is an indication of their increasing perplexity and division among themselves (cf. 7:45-52; 11:46-48).”³² Bruce Milne, however, focuses more on the pessimists among the Pharisees, who were not open to what Yeshua had done, issuing the remark, “No hint here of any openness to review what might have been God’s purpose in giving the Sabbath, or to face the possibility that the God who had given the Sabbath had further things to reveal. Their God was petrified in the past.”³³

²⁶ Morris, *John*, 485.

²⁷ Bruce, *John*, 213.

²⁸ Milne, 139.

²⁹ Keener, *John*, 1:785-786.

³⁰ Witherington, *John*, 183.

³¹ O’Day, in *NIB*, 9:656.

³² Köstenberger, pp 286-287.

³³ Milne, 140.

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The default response, to whom Yeshua might be, is stated by the healed man: “He is a prophet” (v. 17). Even though Yeshua was indeed more than a prophet, *this is certainly to be preferred over Him being labeled a “sinner”* (v. 24). That Yeshua is a divisive figure by His actions, is easily seen in 9:17-34 following, in the interchange which takes place between the formerly blind man and various religious leaders. Sadly, for those who could not see the miracle that had taken place, the formerly blind man saw himself ex-communicated from his synagogue association (9:24).

John 9:1-16 application Unlike some of their Christian counterparts, Messianic examiners of John 9:1-16 are going to be a bit more targeted with evaluating whether or not Yeshua the Messiah actually violated *Shabbat*, in His healing of the blind man. Of the few things which have actually been written by Messianic people on this scene, there are conclusions witnessed, which are consistent with those reflective of a number of the academic Christian thoughts we have just reviewed.

In his co-authored resource on the Gospel of John, Joel Liberman describes how Yeshua’s detractors among various Pharisees, intended to use this healing as a means to discredit Him:

“There were few areas of life which had no religious bearing, and it was natural to consult legal experts rather than medical men about this strange case of healing, since it had been done on the *Shabbat*. Not that an act of healing *as such* infringed the Sabbath law, but an act of healing on the Sabbath was very likely to involve something else which **did** infringe the law. The text says that Yeshua made a mud mass with earth and saliva. What was wrong with that? Simply this: one of the categories of work specifically forbidden on the Sabbath according to Oral Tradition was kneading...{referencing b.*Avodah Zarah* 28b}...and the making of mud or clay with such simple ingredients as earth and saliva was construed as a form of kneading. The problem for the *P’rushim* [Pharisees] was that Yeshua had done this act on the Sabbath day and so they therefore want to investigate and to discover—to have an occasion to discredit Yeshua before the crowds or to charge Him with a crime before the Sanhedrin of breaking or setting aside the Torah of Moses.”³⁴

Liberman goes on to properly recognize that not all of the Pharisees were in agreement, as to whether or not the Sabbath has actually been violated—especially in view of the miracle performed:

“We see that two opposing points of view were expressed by the *P’rushim*, and two opposing conclusions were reached. They are now divided over Yeshua’s credentials. The division may have followed the tendencies attributed to the schools of Shammai and Hillel. The school of Shammai would have argued here that anyone who breaks the Torah is a sinner but the school of Hillel would have had regard for the established facts of the case that Yeshua had performed a good work.”³⁵

Additional commentary on John 9:1-16 is witnessed in D. Thomas’ Lancaster’s 2013 publication, *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels’ Sabbath Conflicts*. He notes some of the debate over whether or not an eye irritation could be healed on the Sabbath, as detailed in b.*Avodah Zarah* 28b (previously quoted):

“The Talmud goes on to justify Sabbath-day eye treatments on the basis that an inflamed eye might cause a threat to one’s life. ‘What is the reason it is permitted?’ the sages asked. ‘Because the eyesight is connected with the muscles of the heart.’ In other words, the eye condition might develop into a more serious matter which constitutes a threat to life, and therefore its treatment takes precedence over the Sabbath as a matter of saving a life. Nevertheless, all agreed that this exception to the rule did not apply to a preexisting condition, nor could medicine be prepared and apply to an eye on the Sabbath simply to improve one’s vision.”³⁶

Lancaster goes on to draw the broad conclusion that medical treatments administered on the Sabbath, are, in fact, permitted by the example of Yeshua the Messiah:

“Had Jesus been party to the above conversation [in b.*Avodah Zarah* 28b], he could have disagreed with the final ruling...Rabbi Jesus believed that compassion for human beings takes precedence over Sabbath prohibitions, even when a man’s malady or disability poses no immediate threat to life. He taught that, since the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath, the alleviation of human suffering supersedes the Sabbath prohibitions {cf.

³⁴ Liberman and Murphy, pp 138-139.

³⁵ Ibid., pp 139-140.

³⁶ Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 91.

John 9:1-16 Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

Hosea 6:6}....The essential message is not that Jesus has cancelled the Sabbath, or that the rabbinic interpretation of the Sabbath is illegitimate. The message is that acts of compassion and mercy performed to alleviate human suffering take precedence over the Sabbath's prohibitions. The miraculous power by which Jesus performs the healings only serves to add God's endorsement to Jesus' legal rationale....

"...Jesus provided a model for his disciples. If he had never used a conventional, medical means to heal on the Sabbath, we might have supposed that Sabbath-day healings are permissible only so long as they are of a completely miraculous nature. By making the mud, smearing it on the man's eyes, and telling him to wash it out of his eyes, the Master demonstrated that one may prepare and administer medical treatments on the Sabbath even if they are not miraculous."³⁷

Most Messianic readers of John 9:1-16, when encountering the particular statements of v. 16—“Then some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man does not come from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a sinful man show such signs as this?’ And there was a division of opinion among them” (Goodspeed New Testament)—are astute enough to recognize how some violation *not* of Biblical Sabbath commandments, but instead various traditional applications, is the issue. Likewise, with there being some doubt present, on the part of various Pharisees, they would also be keen to recognize how there was not uniform agreement as to whether or not the Messiah actually broke the Sabbath. While not wanting to disregard all customary and traditional applications of *Shabbat* from Second Temple Judaism, a fair number of today's Messianic people would sit more at the lenient end of the spectrum when evaluating them. They would not think twice about preparing and applying medicine or some other healing agent, when encountering someone, or their own selves, in need on *Shabbat*.

³⁷ Ibid., pp 92-94.