

### Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11

#### “Doing Good on the Sabbath”

“He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him *to see* if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Get up and come forward!’ And He said to them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?’ But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately *began* conspiring with the Herodians against Him, *as to how they might destroy Him*” (Mark 3:1-6).

All three of the Synoptic Gospels record a scene of Yeshua the Messiah healing a man with a withered or deformed hand, in the synagogue on *Shabbat* (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11).<sup>1</sup> Various authorities present and observing Him, wanted to see if their Sabbath code would be violated by Yeshua healing someone with a physical malady. While each of the Gospel records incorporates some variance of details involving the events, in our evaluation of the seventh-day Sabbath from the Apostolic Scriptures, our focus will mainly be on what different commentators and examiners—on Mark, Matthew, and Luke separately—have said about the Messiah’s observance of *Shabbat*.

Did Yeshua actually violate the Sabbath, or instead violate some applications of the Sabbath present in Second Temple Judaism? If it is the latter, what is communicated about Yeshua’s approach to the customary *halachah*? Did Yeshua oppose all of the traditional Sabbath orthopraxy, or did He just oppose the Sabbath orthopraxy which would prevent *Shabbat* needing to be a significant time which promoted human wholeness?

**Mark 3:1** While there is no time stated between the previous scene of Yeshua’s Disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28), and this new scene of Yeshua healing a man of a withered hand, it is more likely that this was a different *Shabbat*: “Jesus went into the synagogue again and noticed a man with a deformed hand” (NLT). The verb of interest describing the individual’s hand is *xērainō* (ξηραίνω), “**to become dry to the point of being immobilized, be paralyzed**” (BDAG),<sup>2</sup> meaning that his hand was in some way withered or paralyzed. The synagogue that Yeshua had entered into, was likely in Capernaum, but it could have apparently been anywhere in the Galilee.

**Mark 3:2** Various detractors in the synagogue are witnessed to observe Yeshua’s actions, as they were in the process of collecting some kind of evidence against Him, in order to make a legal case: “Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath” (NIV). We should not think that all of the Jewish religious leaders, particularly Pharisees, were antagonists of the Lord, although some of them were certainly quite negative toward anything He would do. PHEME PERKINS issues the advisory word,

“Christians have a special obligation to avoid anti-Semitic stereotyping of the Pharisees and other religious authorities as bound by intolerant legalism. Even some scholarly commentaries on the controversy stories rely on improper generalizations about Jewish legalism. The Pharisees, scribes, and other religious authorities performed a socially necessary function of interpreting the Law so that people could use it to shape their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, sometimes when we see the opponents of Yeshua stemming from the Jewish religious leadership, modern readers have a tendency to forget that various Christian religious leaders seen in history since—including various Protestant leaders—have indeed been seen opposing the teachings and deeds of Yeshua of Nazareth. Religious history is full of people who see an

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<sup>1</sup> Kohlenberger, *NIV Integrated Study Bible*, pp 1162-1163.

<sup>2</sup> BDAG, 684.

<sup>3</sup> Perkins, in *NIB*, 8:559-560.

authoritative figure like Yeshua, and decide that if they were living in His era, they would have done things a bit differently. And doubtless to be true, would be if were Yeshua present in our Twenty-First Century era, He would have many opponents from those who often classify themselves as being “conservative evangelical Christians.”

It should be legitimately thought that the individuals looking to accuse Yeshua, were not regular members of this synagogue, and so they were spying out as to what actions were being performed by Him, which they could use to press charges. Capital punishment was proscribed in the Torah for those who willfully rejected the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13; 35:2). James R. Edwards indicates, “Among the congregation are not simply neutral and impartial observers. They are, rather, motivated ‘to accuse Jesus.’ Markan irony is...present: the authorities deny Jesus the right to do good on the Sabbath while they conspire to do evil on the Sabbath.”<sup>4</sup> So, should any supernatural actions be performed by Yeshua, in the view of these detractors, the Lord would need to have a definite statement to quickly shut them down (3:4), and actually discredit them in view of those observing.

It has to be noted how in carefully watching what Yeshua would do in the synagogue, that His opponents apparently did believe that He possessed supernatural power to heal. *They recognized that some positive action might take place.* However, for some reason or another, these persons found Yeshua to be offensive. Yeshua challenged their interpretation of Sabbath stipulations to be overbearing, and that they missed the point of the Sabbath’s overarching message to human beings. Yeshua may have offended these accusers, because they may have wanted to know why they did not have the supernatural power that He possessed. But, simply by Yeshua demonstrating quantitatively different actions and attitudes, He would, in no uncertain terms, have put many religious leaders in their proverbial “place,” and consequently be perceived as not respecting their positional authority. As Ben Witherington III properly observes for this encounter,

“Jesus does not engage in long dialogues which slowly lead an audience to a proper conclusion. Rather Jesus, speaking authoritatively, seems to have forced the issues rather quickly with a citation of Scripture or proverbial wisdom to support what he said or did. In fact, there is no dialogue or debate at all in this particular story, just implacable opposition which does not or cannot respond to Jesus’ questions.”<sup>5</sup>

**Mark 3:3** Yeshua indeed heals the man with the withered hand, as “He told the man with the paralyzed hand, ‘Stand before us’” (HCSB).

The standard convention for offering medical treatment on the Sabbath, as noted by the Mishnah, was that it was to be provided only if a condition were immediately life threatening. The basic rule was that “any matter of doubt as to danger to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath” (m.*Yoma* 8:6).<sup>6</sup> Longer term ailments, though, were thought to not be so pressing, that they could not wait until after the Sabbath. It is stated in the Mishnah, for example, “they do not straighten [the limb of] a child or set a broken limb” (m.*Shabbat* 22:6).<sup>7</sup> Presumably, the man with the withered or deformed hand, had this handicap for quite some time, and it was not recent. C.E.B. Cranfield notes, “Since the withered hand did not constitute a danger to the man’s life, to heal it on the Sabbath would be in the Pharisees’ view an infringement of the Sabbath and punishable as such.”<sup>8</sup> R.T. France also states, “If anything like the Mishnaic understanding of sabbath law was already recognized...for Jesus to heal this man on the sabbath would be a deliberate violation of the accepted code.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 98.

<sup>5</sup> Witherington, *Mark*, 135.

<sup>6</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, 278.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> France, *Mark*, 150.

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Perhaps for healing a withered hand on *Shabbat*, Yeshua would not be issued a capital penalty by various religious authorities—but He could surely have been censored and discredited if He had to go before a religious court on the charge of Sabbath violation. Yeshua definitely took a risk in healing a man of a withered hand on *Shabbat*. But, as the Lord has recently asserted, the Sabbath was a time made for human beings (2:27). While it is not stated what circumstances had caused the withered hand, Yeshua was One to not just promote human wholeness for *Shabbat*, but also to bring the disenfranchised into greater communion with the Father. Larry W. Hurtado makes a number of critical points, including the fact that all Yeshua did was for the man with the withered hand to stand up, as he would have been instantly healed, and technically no work was performed. But not at all to be overlooked, is how having been healed, this individual could now more fully be integrated into Jewish religious and social life:

"Here Jesus merely commands the man to extend his arm, whereupon the man's hand is restored; this kind of account seems intended to show the tremendous authority of Jesus, who, like God in the creation account of Genesis 1, needs only to speak to work a miracle. But the significance of this healing is more fully seen when one realizes that, according to OT law (Lev. 21:16-24), the maimed or disabled, lepers, and such were forbidden to enter the temple and so could not participate fully in the religious life of the people. Therefore, to heal such a person was to bestow both health and new religious and social acceptance."<sup>10</sup>

**Mark 3:4** There is no accusation voiced against Yeshua's healing of the man with the withered hand, but there had to be enough tension present, so that the Lord could immediately answer whatever criticisms might have been verbally raised. As it appears in most English Bibles, Mark 3:4 reads with, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (RSV). Here, the verb of interest is *exesti* (ἔξεστι), which AMG defines with, "It is possible, referring to moral possibility or propriety meaning it is lawful, right, permitted, can, may."<sup>11</sup> Yeshua the Messiah was not violating the Torah or Law of Moses proper, by pronouncing a healing upon a person, of a long term ailment, on the Sabbath. A much better rendering of Yeshua's question would be, "Is it allowable to do people good on the Sabbath...?" (Goodspeed New Testament) or "Is it permitted on *Shabbat* to do good...?" (TLV).

The main Sabbath praxis of Yeshua the Messiah was that this was a time worthy of deeds of mercy toward those in need, **as good is indeed to always be active in conquering evil**. Yeshua is not going to enter into a synagogue, and see someone in need of help, and do nothing about it. As Edwards explains, "For Jesus, human need poses a moral imperative. Where good needs to be done, there can be no neutrality, and failure to do good is to contribute to the evil...The observers are willing to tolerate the lamentable condition of another human being and in this instance to use it as possible leverage against Jesus. But Jesus does not use people, whether powerful or powerless, for ulterior purposes."<sup>12</sup> **The Messiah was absolutely committed to a Sabbath day where more took place than just physical rest and passive inactivity**. Hurtado makes the astute connection between Yeshua's *Shabbat* healings and miracles, with the future realities that the Sabbath was believed to symbolize:

"[H]is healing on the Sabbath linked his miracles with a day that symbolized for ancient Jews the future kingdom of God, when bondage would cease and the time of joy and messianic celebration would begin...His Sabbath healings then were to be seen as foretastes and signs of the kingdom he confidently announced."<sup>13</sup>

Yeshua's questioning of His detractors—at least what they must have been thinking—had to enter into some kind of ancient Jewish discussion regarding what was, and what was not, permitted

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<sup>10</sup> Hurtado, 50.

<sup>11</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 603.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Hurtado, 51.

on the Sabbath: "What is permitted on *Shabbat*? Doing good or doing evil? Saving life or killing?" (CJB). France draws the conclusion that the Messiah was favorable to a Sabbath keeping, providing that the doing of good was permitted on the day, but also one which quantitatively disregards any Rabbinic prohibitions:

"Together with the principle enunciated in 2:27...this verse establishes a positive approach to sabbath observance which is in principle so elastic that it will be hard to rule out any act which is not in itself unacceptable. Certainly, it leaves no scope for the rabbinic enterprise of building a fence around the sabbath law."<sup>14</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum are the thoughts of D. Thomas Lancaster, in his 2013 book *The Sabbath Breaker*. He, in fact, thinks that Yeshua agreed with all, or at least most, of the Rabbinic prohibitions for *Shabbat*. Rather than disagree with such injunctions (i.e., m.*Yoma* 8:6; m.*Shabbat* 22:6), Yeshua is thought to have agreed with them, except in matters to alleviate human suffering. Lancaster argues,

"[H]e did not dismiss the Sabbath halachah to justify healing on the Sabbath; instead, He argued within the halachah for the justification....He never told the Pharisees, 'It is permissible to heal on the Sabbath because healing does not constitute a prohibited form of work.' Instead, his arguments with the Pharisees all assume that healing is a prohibited form of work. Jesus argued that, even though healing violates the Sabbath, the alleviation of human suffering is a weightier matter than the observance of the Sabbath prohibitions."<sup>15</sup>

More commentators than not will actually veer a middle way between the thought that Yeshua completely disregarded all customary Sabbath *halachah*, or just followed all customary Sabbath *halachah*, with His question, "Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?" (NLT). Yeshua actually posed an *halachic* question by this word. William L. Lane explains, "Formulated in this way, the question demands an answer in terms of the *halakha* as determined in scribal study of the Law. The tradition clearly asserted that the Law was not opposed to the saving of life on the Sabbath. The Pharisees refused to debate the *halakha* with Jesus."<sup>16</sup> In posing the question what is or what is not permitted for the Sabbath, Yeshua does enter into *halachic* discussions; Yeshua does not at all brand all Sabbath applications of His period as being some vain human traditions. But, Yeshua does press *halachic* norms beyond their (then-)accepted limit.

Logically, to be sure, it is absolutely prohibited to do an evil deed, but even more so to do an evil deed on the Sabbath than on other days of the week—precisely because of the sanctity afforded to the seventh day. From Yeshua's perspective, saving life, in the case of the healing bringing wholeness to a human being, was a most appropriate action. R. Alan Cole notes how for the Jewish religious leaders looking on, "Technically speaking, on their own terms, a wrong deed would be a far greater 'profanation' of the sabbath than the good deed which they were scrupulously refusing to do."<sup>17</sup> But Yeshua does not direct the question about doing good in a mere house of study, where the Tanach Scriptures and their application are being debated by teachers and students; Yeshua directs the question just after He has healed a man of a deformed hand. What are His detractors going to say about performing a good work? Witherington states,

"Notice that Jesus is not posing a hypothetical question here, but rather pressing an issue that stands before the audience in the person of the man with the withered hand. In essence Jesus is posing the awkward question to the residents about one of their fellow villagers whether it is all right to help him on this occasion. But Jesus' adversaries refuse to respond."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> France, *Mark*, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Cole, *Mark*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Witherington, *Mark*, pp 133-134.

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In view of what has just happened, with the healing of the withered hand, Yeshua's challenge, "Is it right to do good on the Sabbath day, or to do harm?" (Phillips New Testament), who is going to say that He did a bad deed in healing someone? Cranfield thinks that what Yeshua does, is actually pose a question to His opponents along the lines of whether the Sixth Commandment, which prohibits murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), has been violated. He states, "To omit to do the good which one could do to someone in need is to do evil. It is to break the Sixth Commandment....[T]hey were unwilling to give the true answer, that to do good is allowed and to do evil forbidden, and so admit the falseness of their piety; and they dared not give the other answer, for that would have been to suggest that God had appointed one day in seven on which to do good was forbidden and to do evil allowed."<sup>19</sup> Not expelling the effort to do good, in order to alleviate the suffering of one in your midst in the synagogue on *Shabbat*, is of the same reprehensible character as if someone committed murder. The thought of James 4:17 might be useful to consider here: "Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

Far from Yeshua the Messiah completely dismissing the customary Sabbath *halachah*, Robert A. Guelich draws the fair conclusion that He was actually reworking or redefining some of it, albeit to a more permissive array of good and positive actions that could be performed. He says, "By defining 'to do good' and 'to save a life' in terms of healing a crippled man, Jesus alters the Jewish understanding of saving a life in terms of mortal danger."<sup>20</sup> It would be fair to say that if the standing *halachah* prohibited any acts of healing that could wait for the Sabbath to be over, Yeshua would instead permit them. Guelich goes even to the point of thinking that a physical healing was not just the issue in view, as he indicates, "Much more was at stake than the restoration of a crippled hand. This one was brought into a new life relationship with God through Jesus' healing."<sup>21</sup>

Even though Yeshua did enter into *halachic* discussions with His detractors, as is seen in Mark 3:4, on the whole was He supportive or opposed to the various conventions of Sabbath observance, germane to Second Temple Judaism? To Guelich, "Scribal casuistry sought to clarify and protect the sabbath, not to circumvent its demands. Therefore, Jesus' activity on the sabbath brings about a deliberate confrontation with his opponents who are waiting to charge him with breaking the sabbath."<sup>22</sup> Guelich concludes that for Yeshua's opponents here, "the sabbath was more important than the well-being of a person." Rather than the Messiah being steadfastly opposed to the *halachah*, and with the Messiah especially not opposed to the Sabbath as an institution, Yeshua is instead seen to push the *halachic* view of saving a life as far as He can, with human wholeness being a concern for all times:

"By healing this man, Jesus placed himself on the side of human worth against a depersonalized legalism...Saving a life was the fundamental standard used by the Jews to determine 'good' and 'evil' conduct on the sabbath. Thus Jesus did not programatically set aside the sabbath law for the general 'good' of humanity or even in terms of the Love commandment, which does not enter the discussion. He appears to concur with the Jewish view of the sabbath."<sup>23</sup>

Yeshua did not break the Sabbath as defined by the Mosaic Torah, for certain, in healing a man with a withered hand. Yeshua's healing did, though, represent a more lenient and liberal *halachah* for saving a life, which some of His Jewish contemporaries may not have (initially) approved of—but which was hardly to be refuted, as doing good is not at all something to be eschewed by God's people.

**Mark 3:5** Yeshua is furious with His detractors and with their improper motives, and so asks the healed man to show them what they oppose. As the NEB puts Mark 3:5, "and, looking round at them with anger and sorrow at their obstinate stupidity, he said to the man, 'Stretch out your arm.'

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<sup>19</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 120.

<sup>20</sup> Guelich, 135.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 139-140.

He stretched it out and his arm was restored.” Why did Yeshua’s opponents have a “hardness of heart”? What was their problem? Were their disagreements just associated with Yeshua not fitting into their preconceived ideas of a supernatural healer or prophet? Was Yeshua’s Sabbath *halachah* so unreasonable to them? Nowhere in Mark 6:1-6 is it ever detected that Yeshua opposed the institution of *Shabbat*, but He did surely consider *Shabbat* to be an appropriate day of the week for good deeds. And in this case, did Yeshua actively perform work? It cannot go unnoticed how *apekatestathē* (ἀπεκατεστάθη), “was restored,” is actually an aorist passive. In this scene, at least, all that Yeshua did was effectively declare the man to be healed; He is not noted to have touched Him at all.

*Those who claim to be spiritual, or authorities on things spiritual, are here actually more critical and judgmental of supernatural acts, than those who are normal followers of the Holy One of Israel.* Cole makes the valid, and indeed inconvenient point, with how “It should be noted that this is a sin to which, to judge from Scripture, the theologian and the religiously-minded are more exposed than are the publican and sinner.”<sup>24</sup> Note that the reaction of the religious leaders in this scene, is not one of skepticism and needing to investigate further. They did not say that they needed to think about this over the next few days. Their reaction is instead quite hostile. And in this case, in being hard of heart—what the Phillips New Testament usefully paraphrases as “their inhumanity”—Yeshua’s opponents have missed the major intention of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*. Witherington properly explains,

“They have not perceived that the Sabbath is for the refreshment and restoration and relief of humanity. Nor do they see that Jesus is bringing in the eschatological Sabbath conditions, when there will be ongoing relief for such maladies. The adversaries have missed God’s purpose and compassion in giving the Sabbath in the first place—it was to be a time when those things that wearied or worried a person ceased.”<sup>25</sup>

**Mark 3:6** This brief, six-verse scene, closes with the tragic word, “The *P’rushim* went out and immediately began plotting with some members of Herod’s party how to do away with him” (CJB). The Pharisees who had witnessed the healing of the man with the withered arm in the synagogue, went to join forces with the Herodians, which definitely reveals that there was some kind of political motivation—of all the Messiah’s opponents here—to see Him eliminated. *ISBE* details how the Herodians were largely identical in their theology to the Sadducees—hence they denied the Pharisaic belief in the resurrection (cf. Acts 23:8)—but more importantly they favored Herodian rule of Judea rather than direct Roman rule:

“Evidence from the Gospels seems to indicate that they were adherents of Herod Antipas. They preferred his rule to the direct rule of the Roman prefects. Although at the time of Herod the Great’s death there were some Jews who wanted to put an end to the Herodian rule, later they found the rule of the prefects was less bearable than that of the Herodians. Consequently, Herod Antipas’s rule was strengthened, and some Jews wanted a united nation under him. This may account for their being in Judea as well as in Galilee....One might say that religiously and economically the Sadducees and the Herodians would have been very close if not identical.”<sup>26</sup>

When you see Pharisees and Herodians (who are effective Sadducees) join together for some political purpose—seemingly because Yeshua the Messiah’s actions were thought to possess the potential to bring the brunt of Roman brutality down upon Judea—you indeed have a great disaster. **They could not instead see the potential in this Messiah to usher in a new era of peace and salvation to their Jewish people.** Psalm 2:2 had absolutely declared, “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against His Anointed [*Meshicho*, מְשִׁיחַ].” These were two parties who could agree on very little, and here on the Sabbath,

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *Mark*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> Witherington, *Mark*, 134.

<sup>26</sup> H.W. Hoehner, “Herodians,” in *ISBE*, 2:698.

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they were willing to join forces to conspire to murder Yeshua, something that the Torah expressly forbids and which is something that Yeshua recognized as evil in His questioning (Mark 3:4). Witherington is forced to observe the rather negative, "Jesus, the one who comes to do only good, is, because he does do good on the Sabbath, [was] being plotted against by those who should be upholding the moral order but instead are seeking to do harm, even on the Sabbath, to a healer like Jesus!"<sup>27</sup>

"Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And a man *was there* whose hand was withered. And they questioned Yeshua, asking, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?'—so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, 'What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand!' He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, *as to how they might destroy Him*" (Matthew 12:9-14).

**Matthew 12:9** One can fairly assume that following the incident of plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8), that what is seen in, "Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue" (CJB), was likely not the same day, but on a subsequent Sabbath.

**Matthew 12:10** Having entered into the synagogue, there is a man with a withered, paralyzed, or deformed hand. Will Yeshua heal this person's handicap on the Sabbath? The healing of withered hands is witnessed as being a significant supernatural activity in both the Tanach and Pseudepigrapha:

"The king {Jeroboam} said to the man of God, 'Please entreat the LORD your God, and pray for me, that my hand may be restored to me.' So the man of God entreated the LORD, and the king's hand was restored to him, and it became as it was before" (1 Kings 13:6).

"The Lord bound my hands and feet, however, and thus prevented my hands from performing their deeds, because for seven days my right hand became partly withered. I knew, children, that this had happened to me because of Joseph, so I repented and wept. Then I prayed to the Lord God that my hand might be restored and that I might refrain from every defilement and grudge and from all folly, for I knew that I had contemplated an evil deed in the sight of the Lord and of Jacob, my father, on account of Joseph, my brother, because of my envying him" (*Testament of Simeon* 2:12-13).<sup>28</sup>

What might be the importance of Yeshua the Messiah healing the individual with the withered hand on *Shabbat*? Craig S. Keener indicates, "Jesus heals partly to attest God's endorsement of his ministry (9:4-7); would God heal through him on the Sabbath if God disapproved of his Sabbath ministry?"<sup>29</sup> Matthew's record indicates how "A man with a withered hand was there. And so that they might accuse Him, they questioned Yeshua, saying, 'Is it permitted [*exestin*, ζεστιν] to heal on *Shabbat*?"<sup>30</sup>" (TLV). John Nolland draws out the critical point, "The motivation indicated—'so that they might accuse him'—points to radical alienation: the Pharisees want a 'wrong' answer from Jesus."<sup>31</sup> But, before readers might hastily think that Yeshua the Messiah had a purposeful intention of violating the Sabbath by healing a person, there were ancient Jewish discussions about healing the sick on the Sabbath.

The Mishnah makes the statement, "He who cut open an abscess on the Sabbath—if it is to make an opening for it, he is liable. But if it is to draw out the pus from it, he is exempt" (*m.Eduyot*

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<sup>27</sup> Witherington, *Mark*, pp 136-137.

<sup>28</sup> H.C. Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), pp 785-786.

<sup>29</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 357.

<sup>30</sup> "Is it right to heal on the sabbath?" (Moffat New Testament); "Is it right to cure people on the Sabbath?" (Goodspeed New Testament).

<sup>31</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 487.

2:5).<sup>32</sup> The standing practice among Yeshua's contemporaries was that healing was permitted on the Sabbath when a life was in danger (m.*Yoma* 8:6), but things which could wait until after the Sabbath should wait. This would have included life-long ailments, such as the malady of a withered hand.

Noting the Pharisaical School of Shammai as "the strict majority Pharisaic school in this period," Keener usefully informs that "Although they prohibited prayer for the sick on the Sabbath, they never sought to kill the minority school at the time, Hillelite Pharisees, who permitted prayer on the Sabbath....[D]ifferences in legal interpretation did not constitute highhanded breach of the Sabbath or warrant death. If these Pharisees are upset—contradicting their own Sabbath beliefs—this says more about them in this narrative than it does about Jesus' practice of the Sabbath."<sup>33</sup> This scene will notably end in tension (12:14).

**Matthew 12:11** Yeshua answers the inquiry as to whether or not healing is permitted on *Shabbat*, with a comparison and contrast between human beings and animals: "Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?" (ESV). It is properly recognized that Yeshua makes a *qal v'chomer* (light and heavy) or a *fortiori* (with stronger reason) argument. **A human being is more important than an animal.** Matthew 6:26 had previously stated, after all, "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?"

It cannot go overlooked how the Essene community notably did not permit the rescue of an animal on the Sabbath: "No one should help an animal give birth on the Sabbath; and if it falls into a well or a pit, he may not lift it out on the Sabbath" (CD 11.13-14).<sup>34</sup> Even the rescue of a person who fell into a well would not have been permitted on the Sabbath: "Any living human who falls into a body of water or a cistern shall not be helped out with ladder, rope, or other instrument" (CD 11.16-17).<sup>35</sup> Yet, the Talmud does record a discussion of how in a later period, helping a female human being give birth would be permitted on the Sabbath, with some limited activity for helping a female cow give birth permitted:

"They do not deliver the young of cattle on the festival, but they help out. And they do deliver the young of a woman on the Sabbath. They call a midwife for her from a distant place, and they violate the Sabbath on her [the woman in childbirth's] account. And they tie the umbilical cord. R. Yosé says, 'Also: They cut it.' And all things required for circumcision do they perform on the Sabbath" (b.*Shabbat* 128b).<sup>36</sup>

R.T. France observes that "The instinct which led to this later ruling (together with the less altruistic desire to protect a valuable asset!) was evidently already present in Jesus' time in common practice, so that Jesus could take it for granted and assume that the Pharisees would not object to it."<sup>37</sup> The Pharisees were hardly as rigid as the Essenes, but would those present truly accept what Yeshua was doing?

**Matthew 12:12** Yeshua further asserts to those who might criticize Him, "How much more valuable then is a human being than a sheep! So then, it is permitted [*exestin*, ἐξεστίν] to do good on the Sabbath" (PME). Nolland interjects, "The comparison between the value of a person and a sheep is similar to the comparison with birds in 6:26; 10:31. The place of humanity in the creation accounts of Gn. 1-2 is likely to be ultimately reflected (and cf. Ps. 8)."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, if one would take basic care of an animal like a sheep on *Shabbat*, then it is surely valid to take care for the needs of

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<sup>32</sup> Neusner, *Mishnah*, 644.

<sup>33</sup> Keener, *Matthew*, 358.

<sup>34</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 69.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

<sup>37</sup> France, *Matthew*, 465.

<sup>38</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 488.

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one's fellow human beings. We should agree with the conclusion of D. Thomas Lancaster, in his 2013 book *The Sabbath Breaker*, on this point:

"The Master appealed to what must then have been a standard practice, at least in the Galilee: Saving your animal's life took precedence over the Sabbath prohibition on carrying and lifting. At least no one in the synagogue raised any objection to that premise. If that was not an accepted standard of the time and place, Jesus' argument would have lost its rhetorical force. Several men in the synagogue could have simply raised their hands and said, 'We would not take hold of it or lift it out.'"<sup>39</sup>

**Matthew 12:13** Having declared that doing good is absolutely permissible on the Sabbath, it is recorded, "Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other" (NIV). It needs to be recognized how the verb *apekatestathē* (ἀπεκατεστάθη), "was restored," is an aorist passive, the passive voice being an important clue of how no actual work was formally conducted. *Yeshua spoke a word, and the man's hand was healed*. Michael J. Wilkins astutely notes, "Without uttering a command of healing or even touching the withered limb, Jesus heals the man's hand completely. This is similar to the way Yahweh had control over Moses' diseased hand (Ex. 4:6-7)."<sup>40</sup>

**Matthew 12:14** It is easy to recognize how the Pharisees present, having witnessed the healing, were incensed and infuriated at what took place. But what is intended by the remark in v. 14, variably translated as, "But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him" (RSV), or "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus" (NIV)? It is true from the Torah that Sabbath violations could merit capital punishment (Exodus 31:14; 35:2). But, there is no clear evidence from the healing that Yeshua intended to break the Sabbath, as much as He only had a disagreement with those present over Sabbath *halachah*. Death would hardly have been sought for a disagreement over Sabbath application, so might some form of censure instead be in view here?

The verb *apollumi* (ἀπόλλυμι) does allow for a variance of renderings, as it can mean "to destroy utterly, kill, slay, and of things, to destroy, demolish, waste," as well as "to lose utterly" (LS).<sup>41</sup> Some alternative renderings, which do not imply that death would have been sought here, include: "how they could get rid of him altogether" (Phillips New Testament), "sputtering about how they were going to ruin Jesus" (The Message), "with the intention of doing away with him" (Kingdom New Testament). France concurs, "it was hardly realistic for these Pharisees to think of having Jesus officially executed in Galilee, and Matthew's verb 'get rid of'...need not carry that specific sense. They are determined to silence him, to put an end to his influence on the people."<sup>42</sup>

Even with "destroy" in Matthew 12:14 approached from the standpoint of various Pharisees wanting to discredit the Lord's ministry—and not wanting to kill Him—this hardly means that there is not a series of events throughout the Lord's ministry which would lead to Him being executed. *Yeshua is simply not executed from a presumed breaking of the Sabbath*.

But why did the religious authorities here want to "destroy" Him? This is where it needs to be evaluated how seriously Yeshua was challenging the control of the religious elites. Nolland indicates, "Jesus as teacher rather than Jesus as healer was the problem."<sup>43</sup> Even with it appropriately recognized that in the Gospel of Matthew, Yeshua the Messiah did afford some level of significant authority to the Pharisees (Matthew 23:2-3),<sup>44</sup> and with it a broad adherence to many edifying and useful ancient Jewish traditions—there were definitely points of conflict on various issues. Leon

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<sup>39</sup> Lancaster, *Sabbath Breaker*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Wilkins, 443.

<sup>41</sup> LS, 101.

<sup>42</sup> France, *Matthew*, 466.

<sup>43</sup> Nolland, *Matthew*, 489.

<sup>44</sup> Consult the exegesis paper on Matthew 23:2-3 by J.K. McKee, "Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?", appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

Morris observes, “what Jesus did called in question their understanding of the law of God, and thus their whole theological position. If his popularity led people to follow him in this, then their leadership was threatened. More was at stake than the health of an unknown cripple.”<sup>45</sup>

Donald A. Hagner thinks that in healing the man on the Sabbath, “The authority of Jesus...supplants the authority of the scribal tradition of the Pharisees. But since the debate comes down finally to the person of Jesus, the Pharisees know intuitively that he must be removed if their system is to remain intact. The tragedy is not the failure to accept Jesus’ argument but the failure to be receptive to Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom.”<sup>46</sup> Debates over Sabbath *halachah* aside, the true problem in this Sabbath healing is that Yeshua in His person has ushered in a new time of salvation history, and these religious leaders are widely unwilling to accept it, much less recognize its significant power to change lives.

“On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Get up and come forward!’ And he got up and came forward. And Yeshua said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?’ After looking around at them all, He said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand!’ And he did so; and his hand was restored. But they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Yeshua” (Luke 6:6-11).

**Luke 6:6** Luke states that Yeshua the Messiah had an explicit intention to go into the synagogue to teach on *Shabbat*, and as is seen, He actually does teach by means of a dramatic encounter with a person who has a withered or shriveled hand: “On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled” (NIV). There have been interjections that this was the synagogue at Capernaum (Mark 1:21; 3:1), but no certainty can be attached to this.<sup>47</sup> The exact condition of the individual’s hand is detailed via the adjective *xēros* (ξηρός), which *BDAG* states “**pert. to being shrunken or withered and therefore immobile because of disease, withered, shrunken, paralyzed.**”<sup>48</sup>

**Luke 6:7** Yeshua’s detractors among the Jewish religious leadership were present at the synagogue, observing His actions: “The *Torah*-teachers and *P’rushim* watched Yeshua carefully to see if he would heal on *Shabbat*, so that they could accuse him of something” (CJB). While in the customary Sabbath *halachah* formally codified in later Jewish writings, it was indeed permitted to help someone suffering from an immediate, life-threatening ailment or situation (m.*Yoma* 8:6),<sup>49</sup> maladies which were not immediately life-threatening—such as someone having a withered hand—were believed less important that they could wait until the Sabbath was over. Yeshua the Messiah, as the herald of His Father’s Kingdom, looks at all forms of suffering and illness as an impediment to be decisively overcome. *Suffering and illness stand in stark contrast to what an institution of the Sabbath represents: a time of rest and refreshment for the people of God.*

The thoughts of some Luke commentators on the presence of various scribes and Pharisees in the synagogue on *Shabbat* need to be recognized. Joel B. Green issues the observation, “Their

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<sup>45</sup> Morris, *Matthew*, pp 307-308; also Barney Kasdan, *Matthew Presents Yeshua, King Messiah: A Messianic Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2011), 123.

<sup>46</sup> Hagner, *Matthew*, 33a:334.

<sup>47</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 234.

<sup>48</sup> *BDAG*, 685.

<sup>49</sup> “Further did R. Mattiah b. Harash say, ‘Who has a pain in his throat—they drop medicine into his mouth on the Sabbath, because it is a matter of doubt as to danger to life. And any matter of doubt as to danger to life overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath.’ He upon whom a building fell down—it is a matter of doubt whether or not he is there, it is a matter of doubt whether [if he is there], he is alive or dead, it is a matter of doubt whether [if he is there and alive] he is a gentile or an Israelite—they clear away the ruin from above him. [If] they found him alive, they remove the [remaining] ruins from above him. But if they found him dead, they leave him be [until after the Sabbath]” (m.*Yoma* 8:6; Neusner, *Mishnah*, 278).



but *σῶσαι* is here not at all theological.<sup>53</sup> I. Howard Marshall describes how more poignantly, Yeshua directs how actions performed on the Sabbath cannot be classified along the lines of good or neutral, but instead good and evil:

“Jesus relates the institution of the Sabbath to the good purpose of God for men which lay behind it and hence to the principle of love for each other which ought to characterise their use of it. The contrast is not between doing good and doing nothing, a set of alternatives which would have enabled the Pharisees to justify refraining from healing the sick man, but between doing good and positively doing evil: to fail to do good is tantamount to doing harm. Thus to fail to heal is to do harm to the sufferer who must continue to suffer.”<sup>54</sup>

In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, David H. Stern draws out how modern, presumably (at least mainly) Orthodox Jewish *halachah*, would approach a situation of someone requiring medical attention:

(1) On *Shabbat*, healing to save life is not only permitted but a duty.

(2) Caring for the seriously ill (e.g., those with a high fever or pain affecting the whole body) is allowed, within certain constraints.

(3) Treating minor ailments is prohibited by *g'zerah* (rabbinical decree)—the reason being that most treatments require grinding to prepare medicine, and grinding is a prohibited form of work (see 12:2N).

Since a shriveled hand is neither life-threatening nor “serious,” this healing, on the face of it, violates today’s *halakhah* concerning *Shabbat*.

However, since Yeshua did not use medicine and hence no grinding was done, a case could have been made—in the fluid halakhic environment of the first century—that no violation had taken place...<sup>55</sup>

Of course, in the more progressive-to-liberal branches of Judaism today, paying attention to the needs of the poor, oppressed, and handicapped—would be among the significant themes of *Shabbat* being a time of rest and refreshment, definitely requiring the attention of Jewish people. And certainly, not all Orthodox Jews would frown on seeing acts of kindness and mercy performed on *Shabbat*.

Back to what is witnessed from Yeshua’s word in Luke 6:9, “Let me ask you something: What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?” (The Message). In the estimation of Craig A. Evans, “Since the Pharisaic tradition allowed for deeds of mercy to be performed on the Sabbath (e.g., see m. *Yoma* 8.6 and b. *Shabbath* 132a), especially in life and death matters, Jesus’ questions have backed his opponents into a corner.”<sup>56</sup> Culpepper thinks that for Yeshua, an institution like the Sabbath is not to be approached from the thought that it is all about a list of what one may not do, but instead positive actions that one must do:

“How are they observing the sabbath: By doing good or doing evil? Specifically, while Jesus is seeking to do good, are they not doing evil? Are they seeking to destroy him while he is seeking to heal? The question places the alternatives in a new light. Sabbath observance is defined positively, not in terms of what one will not do, but in terms of what one must do.”<sup>57</sup>

Nolland concludes that for Yeshua the Messiah, every action to be undertaken was to be guided by the directive of love for God and neighbor. Hence, any kind of human suffering, whenever it is encountered, needs to be confronted and resolved:

“Jesus’ conviction [was] that the love of God is inseparably linked to love of neighbor (10:25-37). That which honors God cannot dishonor my neighbor. That which leaves my neighbor in his suffering can only be evil. Not even on the sabbath (or perhaps especially not on the sabbath) can

<sup>53</sup> Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:261.

<sup>54</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 235.

<sup>55</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 117.

<sup>56</sup> Evans, 100.

<sup>57</sup> Culpepper, in *NIB*, 9:135.

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there be a comfortable neutrality that is content to define one's responsibilities negatively in terms of what is not to be done."<sup>58</sup>

**Luke 6:10** Noting how doing good is an imperative of the Sabbath day, the record states, "After looking around at them all, He said to him, 'Stretch out your hand!' And he did so; and his hand was restored." All Yeshua says to the man with the withered hand is "Hold out your hand" (NLT, CJB), and then he is healed. Amy-Jill Levine usefully indicates, in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, "Jesus does not touch the man, and therefore prevents suspicion of 'working.'"<sup>59</sup>

**Luke 6:11** The group which is unambiguously angry about this is Yeshua's detractors, as it has indeed been pointed out to them that by not caring for those who are suffering, they have—at least in theory—found to be facilitators of evil: "But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus" (RSV). While "rage" (NASU) or "fury" (RSV/NRSV/ESV) are the major default renderings, the term *anoia* (ἄνοια) is more "want of understanding, folly" (LS),<sup>60</sup> with the NEB having, "But they were beside themselves with anger." Notably lacking from Luke 6:11, unlike Mark 3:6 and Matthew 12:14, is any reference to the scribes and Pharisees wanting to go and conspire to do harm to Yeshua. Marshall notes, "Luke knows of a friendly relationship between Jesus and at least some of the Pharisees [and that] may help to explain why Luke plays down their hostile reaction here."<sup>61</sup>

The major question that Messianic readers of Luke 6:6-11 bring to the scene is hardly the permissiveness of Yeshua the Messiah healing the man with the withered hand on *Shabbat*. And, it is especially not the necessary imperative of acts of goodness and compassion being done on *Shabbat*. Instead, the prevailing issue—often pressed by outside critics—is whether Yeshua intended to abolish or abrogate the Sabbath by this healing. For a Christian commentator like Stein, the basic conclusion to be drawn from Luke is how the attitude of Believers toward the Sabbath should be the same as the Messiah's:

"This passage had apologetical significance with regard to the life-style of the early church, for it pointed out that the Christian attitude toward the Sabbath was determined by the example and teachings of Jesus, the Lord. The basic Lukan teaching in this passage, however, involves Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath."<sup>62</sup>

Green's approach from Luke 6:6-11 is not so much anti-Sabbath as much as it is anti-establishment-Sabbath. He states, "Jesus refuses to represent Sabbath observance as a litmus test for faithfulness to God. More fundamental for him is God's design to save—a purpose that is not incompatible with Sabbath observance but, in fact, is embodied in God's purpose for the Sabbath."<sup>63</sup> Green does not have to be approached as being anti-Sabbath by these remarks, but he does believe that any understanding of the Sabbath is incomplete without recognizing the Messiah's activities on the Sabbath. Nolland goes further in his conclusion, "The Pharisees, who in their fixed and restrictive ways are determined that the sabbath be defined negatively in terms of what is not to be done...are made furious by Jesus' liberality."<sup>64</sup>

Luke 6:6-11 certainly does highlight for today's Messianic people how the Sabbath is an appropriate time to do good, and how our honoring of *Shabbat* must be focused around the example of Yeshua the Messiah.

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<sup>58</sup> Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:261.

<sup>59</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> LS, 73.

<sup>61</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 236.

<sup>62</sup> Stein, 190.

<sup>63</sup> Green, 256.

<sup>64</sup> Nolland, *Luke*, 35a:262.