

Sabbath Violation, Alleged by Yeshua

How do you respond to the various claims that Yeshua broke the Sabbath?

Some Christians are of the position that our Messiah Yeshua, the sinless Lamb of God and perfect sacrifice for our sin, actually broke the Sabbath. This is a serious claim because if He broke the Sabbath and if He sinned, then perhaps Yeshua could not be the Messiah and His sacrifice could not atone for our sin—which 1 John 3:4 tells us is lawlessness or disobedience to the Torah.

There are two specific instances we will discuss that some Christians believe give reference to the Messiah breaking *Shabbat*.

The first claim given to prove that Messiah “broke the Sabbath” is when His Disciples were plucking grain in the fields (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5):

“At that time Yeshua went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of *grain* and eat. But when the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.’ But He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?’” (Matthew 12:1-4, NASU).

Those who tell us from these verses that Yeshua broke the Sabbath usually quote the Pharisees who said, “Why are you doing what is not permitted to be done on the Sabbath days?” (Luke 6:2, Amplified Bible). The Complete Jewish Bible translates this as, “Why are you violating *Shabbat*?” While Yeshua is not picking the heads of grain, His Disciples are, and this reflects back on Him as their Teacher and Rabbi.

It is important for us to first note that there is no specific commandment in the Torah that forbids picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. The Greek *exesti* (ἔξεστι) correctly means “*it is allowed, it is in one’s power, is possible*” (LS).¹ The Mishnah includes two types of work on the Sabbath that were prohibited by Rabbis in Yeshua’s day, which He could have been accused of breaking: reaping and threshing (m.*Shabbat* 7:2). Those holding a rigid interpretation of the Oral Law would have immediately accused Yeshua of doing something that was not permitted on the Sabbath. However, Luke 6:2 notably tells us, “But some of the Pharisees said.” The Scripture does not indicate that this was a position held by *all* of the Pharisees. Placing this Scripture in its appropriate historical context is imperative.

Secondly, in His response to these Pharisees, Yeshua gives the example of David and his men eating the consecrated bread that was only reserved for the priests to be eaten. This is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:3-4, 6:

“Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found.’ The priest answered David and said, “There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women’ ...So the priest gave him consecrated *bread*; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* when it was taken away” (NASU).

In the example given from the Tanach regarding David and his men, it is important to realize that the priest provided them with food from the Bread of the Presence, which was only permitted for the priests to eat. The Torah says in Leviticus 24:9 that this bread “shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for

¹ LS, 273.

it is most holy to him from the LORD's offerings by fire, his portion forever." However, because they were hungry and required sustenance, the priest gave them this bread.

Eating something to provide sustenance and thus maintain one's physical life falls into a category that the Rabbis of Judaism call *Pikku'ach Nefesh* or "regard for human life." It is based on Leviticus 19:16: "neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour" (1917 JPS). The *ArtScroll Chumash* commentary states, "If someone's life is in danger, you must try to save him."² It is important that we note that this understanding has also been taken to mean, in regard to the Sabbath, that any work that is required to save a person's life takes precedence over the ritual *Shabbat* commandments of the Torah. This is the reason why in the modern State of Israel today, doctors, police, and the military are permitted to work on *Shabbat*.

Yeshua's example of David being fed by the Bread of the Presence was poignant in that the priest followed Leviticus 19:16 by providing needed sustenance to David and his party. And, His Disciples were likewise only providing for themselves the necessary food for survival. Yeshua's Disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath was well permitted within the larger theological construct of First Century Judaism, but not liked by a few extremists.

Another example often used by those who say that Yeshua broke *Shabbat* comes from John 5:6-18 where He heals a sick man on the Sabbath and then commands him to pick up his pallet and walk:

"When Yeshua saw him lying *there*, and knew that he had already been a long time *in that condition*, He said to him, 'Do you wish to get well?' The sick man answered Him, 'Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.' Yeshua said to him, 'Get up, pick up your pallet and walk.' Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and *began* to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day" (John 5:6-9, NASU).

In these verses, we can most certainly see application of *Pikku'ach Nefesh*. Yeshua was saving the life of a person by healing him on the Sabbath. In response to this, we see the response of some of the Jews watching this: "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet" (John 5:10). These Pharisees were dismayed that the man would carry his pallet on *Shabbat*, because they believed that it was in violation of Nehemiah 13:19-20:

"It came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates *so that* no load would enter on the sabbath day. Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem" (NASU).

These verses indicate that it was prohibited for loads to be carried on the Sabbath, but specifically loads relating to business and commerce. These loads were being carried into Jerusalem for buying and selling on *Shabbat*, which is why Jerusalem's gates were closed. Without a doubt, many Pharisees considered this to be a "burden" or *masa* (מַסָּה), which means "load, burden, lifting, bearing, tribute" (*BDB*),³ which would include pallets. The Septuagint translates *masa* as *bastagma* (βάσταγμα), something specifically meaning "*that which is borne, a burden*" (*LS*),⁴ but it is not used in the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.

What the healed man specifically carried was what the Greek calls a *krabbatos* (κράββατος), or "*a pallet, camp bed*" (*Thayer*).⁵ UBSHNT renders *krabbatos* as *mishkav* (מִשְׁכָּב), or simply "bed." While sizes of beds no doubt differed, it is doubtful that this invalid's pallet was something large and heavy. *AMG* offers us the following valuable description of a *krabbatos*:

"A small couch used by the poor. It denotes a simple kind of bed...[which] usually consisted of a padded quilt or thin mattress to be used according to the season or the condition of the owner with or without covering."⁶

With a proper understanding of *Pikku'ach Nefesh*, Yeshua did not violate the Sabbath at all by telling the healed man to pick up his pallet that was a light bed that only weighed a few pounds. Yeshua did, however, no doubt "violate" the theological opinions of this group of Pharisees. Stern observes in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, "they could not see that the formerly crippled man's ability to carry his mat attested to God's glory."⁷

² Nossou Scherman, ed., et. al., *The ArtScroll Chumash, Stone Edition*, 5th ed. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 661.

³ *BDB*, 672.

⁴ *LS*, 148.

⁵ *Thayer*, 358.

⁶ *Zodhiates, Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 883.

⁷ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 168.

The arguments from those who do not want to keep *Shabbat* will go on and on. Many people will try to present cases that seemingly prove that Messiah Yeshua, the sinless Lamb of God and who is One with the Father, violated the Sabbath and broke His own commandments. Sadly, these arguments are not placed within the framework of First Century Judaism, and often relate to Christians' ignorance of the historical occurrence of Biblical events. Knowing what these things properly mean and how they relate to us today is only further reason for us to continually study the Gospels from a distinct Messianic viewpoint.

(This includes excerpts from the author's article "**Is Sunday 'the Lord's Day'?**", appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*.)