

# The Sabbath in Matthew, Mark, and Luke

by Herold Weiss

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It is no secret that Adventists have been rather defensive about the Sabbath. The Sabbath, maybe even more than the expectation of the Second Coming, has been the doctrine that has given our Christianity its particular tone, and been our most visible identity marker. To most Adventists, however, the Sabbath has been tied to the Law; many feel that to defend the Sabbath, they must defend the Law.

Adventists have not been the only ones who have tied the Sabbath to the Law. Others have argued that Jesus abolished the Sabbath, and thereby did away with the Law. This essay will show that such a conclusion is unwarranted, and that to read the gospel stories as involved in an argument for or against the validity of the Sabbath is to misread them. The gospels take the validity of the Sabbath for granted. Specifically, I will argue that Matthew, Mark, and Luke (what scholars call the Synoptic Gospels) indicate that the early Christians took for granted that Jesus had observed the Sabbath, that they themselves also observed it, and that their debates on the subject centered on permissible and nonpermissible Sabbath activities.

A careful examination of the references to the Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels shows that none of them takes issue with the Sabbath's validity.

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Jesus' sayings and activities on the Sabbath were not understood to have rendered it obsolete, and thus destroyed the Jewish law. After the death and resurrection of Christ, the Christian communities, which left us the gospels, did not discuss whether to keep the Sabbath, but how.

## *General Approach to the Gospels*

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First I need to say a word about the approach I will use in studying the Sabbath passages in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. My inquiry uses the historical-critical method. Although some object to the notion of "critical," this word only denotes that when reading the New Testament it is legitimate to ask questions and to seek solutions to the questions.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has studied the Synoptic Gospels cannot finish reading them without having all sorts of questions in mind. The answers to these questions have been in the works for 200 years, and today New Testament scholarship has reached a consensus on some basic matters. These need to be set out before I embark on our inquiry about the Sabbath.

New Testament scholars have come to understand that the degree of verbal similarity among the Synoptic Gospels can be explained only in terms of literary dependency. The careful study of the relationships among the Synoptics has resulted in the conclusion that the Gospel of Mark

was written first, probably in connection with the fall of Jerusalem around 70 C. E.<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of Matthew was written about 15 years later by someone who used the Gospel of Mark as the basic source of information, and the Gospel of Luke was written about 20 years after Mark by someone who used Mark and several other sources (as he openly acknowledges in 1:1-3). Moreover, since there are 23 sections of Matthew and Luke in which these two gospels have a very strong literary dependence on material not reported by Mark (and therefore could not have been derived from Mark), it is clear that these two gospels had another common source besides Mark. Scholars designate this presently unavailable common source by the letter *Q*.

Another matter of scholarly consensus is that the material that came into the gospels had been kept alive in the oral tradition of the early Christian synagogues. There, Christians engaged in the exegesis of the Old Testament, preached, taught, and in general encouraged and debated with one another. This means that the things Jesus did and said were remembered and adapted for use in the different ministries of the church. So any study of the Synoptic material has to take into consideration how the material was handled in the oral tradition, how it came into a written gospel, and how it passed from one gospel to another. It also has to ask the question as to what may have been in the theological agenda at each of these stages in the transmission.

## *Consensus That Sabbath Should be Observed*

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To make better sense of it, I will arrange the material in Matthew, Mark, and Luke about the Sabbath into three categories. First, I will look at what seem to be actual historical reminiscences of the early Christians, even if we find variations in the reports. Second, I will deal with what are clear “redactional” statements, brought into the account by the evangelists as they composed their story. Finally,

I will examine those reports that fit somewhere in between the previous two categories; that is, reports that show quite a bit of elaboration in the process of oral transmission.

The references to the Sabbath in connection with the burial and the resurrection of Jesus clearly reflect historical reminiscences. Taking Mark’s account first, one notices that it matter-of-factly reports that on the evening of the Day of Preparation, identified as *prosabbaton* (15:42), Joseph of Arimathea arranged to have Jesus taken from the cross and placed in a tomb while two Marys watched the proceedings. Then, when the Sabbath had passed (16:1), three women went to the tomb to anoint the body. In this account it is taken for granted that all readers would understand the necessity to postpone the anointing due to the Sabbath.

Matthew’s account follows Mark’s rather closely in the burial scene, omitting Pilate’s inquiry about Jesus’ condition, and adding that the tomb actually belonged to Joseph. The author, however, finds it necessary to rebut the slanderous accusation that the disciples had stolen the body. Thus one reads of the arrangement made by the Pharisees to have the tomb sealed and guarded (27:62). Here the author delights in showing the Pharisees in flagrant violation of the Sabbath while, by contrast, the Christian women wait until after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus’ body (28:1). The anti-Pharisaic bias of Matthew is unmistakable.

Luke also follows Mark in the details of the burial, pointing out that it was the Day of Preparation and the Sabbath was beginning (23:54). Then, somewhat to our surprise (since usually this gospel is reluctant to mention the Law and the Commandments) we read that the women went home and prepared the spices and ointments, but “on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment” (23:56, RSV throughout). From these reports no one could detect that there was anything unusual about the behavior of the women. Nothing is said to explain that what may have been a matter of concern back then (31 C.E.) was such no longer (70-90 C.E.).

We shift, then, to a consideration of the four clearly “redactional” references to the Sabbath in the Synoptic Gospels. I may begin with Mark 1:21

(par. Luke 4:31), the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum which, it is said, took place on a Sabbath while Jesus was teaching there. The fact that the incident took place on a Sabbath in no way contributes to our understanding of it. In the oral tradition the story was probably told without a Sabbath connection.

Our second reference is Mark 6:4, where Jesus' teaching in the synagogue on a Sabbath gives rise to opposition and the saying, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." Again,

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this Sabbath reference is secondary. This saying is reported in the other three gospels (Matthew 13:57; Luke 4:24; John 4:44), but in each one of them it has a totally different setting. Thirdly, one may note Luke 4:16, the introduction to the famous sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, where the author of Luke/Acts says of Jesus what he also says of Paul: he was in the synagogue on the Sabbath "as was his custom."<sup>3</sup> Here the author leaves no doubt that he is making a personal observation.

Finally, let us examine how the Markan statement, "Pray that it may not happen in winter" (13:18), is expanded by Matthew into "Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a sabbath" (24:20). Luke, who also uses most of Mark 13 in Luke 21, chose to omit the saying. We may conjecture that, if Luke was written about 90 C.E., it was already well known that the fall of Jerusalem had not taken place in winter, and thus what had been a concern in Mark's time was no longer relevant. Matthew, on the other hand, gave the saying a new lease on life by expressing concern for the Sabbath rest. Whichever way one explains the evidence, it is safe to say that the saying belongs to the Matthean redaction.

As a group, these redactional references make clear that at the time when the gospels were

written the Christian communities still understood the significance of the Sabbath and were concerned about its observance. There are no redactional statements that qualify in any way the validity of Sabbath observance.

## *Controversies Over How to Observe the Sabbath*

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The evidence presented thus far shows that the Christian communities that sustained the Synoptic tradition did observe the Sabbath, and probably felt that they were doing it even better than the Pharisees. One does not receive the impression here that the Sabbath was at the center of a dispute. There are, however, other references in the Synoptics that leave no doubt that Sabbath observance was a controversial matter. The prime evidence comes from material in our third category: that which went through elaboration in the oral transmission.

Let us begin with the two stories that appear together, and in the same order, in all three Synoptics. These are the incidents of the disciples plucking grain while making their way through a wheat field (Mark 2:23-28, par. Matthew 12:1-8, par. Luke 6:1-5), and the healing of the man with the withered hand at the synagogue (Mark 3:1-6, par. Matthew 12:9-14, par. Luke 6:6-11). I would like to begin by looking at the Matthean and the Lukan versions first, leaving Mark's more original version for last.

Matthew expands the story of the disciples in the wheat field by making a parallel to David's men at the tabernacle: both groups of men were hungry. Besides noting their being hungry (not mentioned by Mark), Matthew also finds another Old Testament story to support the practice. He writes, "Have you not read in the law how in the sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless?" This second precedent corresponds to an ordering of priorities known from the Rabbinic literature, to which Matthew gives an appropriate Christological twist. According to Rabbi Simeon ben Menasiah,

Rabbi Akiba (120-135 C.E.) taught: "If punishment for murder has precedence over temple worship, which in turn has precedence over the Sabbath, how much more the safeguarding of life must have precedence over the Sabbath."<sup>4</sup>

Both Matthew and Akiba seem to agree that the temple has precedence over the Sabbath. How-

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ever, while Akiba derives from this principle that activities on behalf of those in peril have precedence over temple activities, Matthew concludes that the activities of Jesus have precedence over temple activities. As he says: "Something greater than the temple is here!" We may also notice that in order to bolster his position Matthew also quotes Hosea 6:6, a Christian proof text that could be applied to different circumstances (cf. Matthew 9:13).

Luke places his imprint on the same narrative by changing the nature of the charge brought by the Pharisees. Rather than challenge the conduct of his disciples, the Pharisees challenge the action of Jesus himself: "Why are you doing what is not lawful?" they ask. Like Matthew, who used the story in order to establish the superiority of Jesus over the temple, Luke is also bringing in Christological considerations by putting Jesus himself at the center of the controversy.

The Christological interest is also shown by the fact that both record the secondary affirmation that "the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath," but leave out the more radical Marcan statement, "the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." These transformations of the story within the synoptic tradition show us that with the passage of time a story that had been used to settle questions about what is permissible, or lawful Sabbath activity, came to be used to establish the Lordship of Christ, a theological point not quite relevant to practical questions about lawful Sabbath conduct. In its role as a Sabbath controversy story the Matthean version, especially, shows the

use of Old Testament proof texts in order to settle disputes concerning permissible Sabbath conduct.

Taking up the story of the healing of the man with the withered hand, we see that Matthew has again altered the Marcan account in order to introduce material from *Q*. In the earlier Marcan version Jesus takes the initiative and asks, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" Scholars have seen this story as having been built around a "punch line," only in this case the punch line has been turned into a question. This phenomenon is well known in rabbinic arguments.<sup>5</sup> We notice that Matthew takes the punch line away from the lips of Jesus and gives it to the Pharisees, again a procedure used elsewhere within the Synoptic oral tradition.<sup>6</sup> This allows Matthew's Jesus to come up with a new punch line, which Matthew has received from *Q*, and which appears in three versions within the Synoptics.

Besides being Jesus' answer in this Matthean narrative, it appears as a doublet in Luke,<sup>7</sup> once at the healing of the woman who had been suffering for 18 years a spirit of infirmity (Luke 13:10-17), and again at the healing of the man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6). Here are the three versions of this one *Q* saying:

What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? (Matthew 12:11)

Which of you having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well, will not immediately pull him out on a sabbath day? (Luke 14:5)

Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it away to water it? (Luke 13:15)

In the Matthean setting, the *Q* saying prompts the exclamation, "Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!" followed by a direct reply to the Pharisaic question, "So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Clearly, the story remains focused on the lawfulness of certain activities on the Sabbath, without any consideration being given to the agent of the act.

The Lukan version of the healing of the man with the withered hand preserves the Marcan

story almost word for word, but here the story does receive some Christological twists. This version omits reference to the fact that Jesus “looked . . . at them in anger” (Mark 3:5), and instead records that Jesus “knew their thoughts” (Luke 6:8). These changes, however, do not play a role in the subject of our inquiry.

We now turn to the Marcan accounts of the two stories we have been examining. The story of the disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath has consistently caught the attention of scholars for its artificiality.<sup>8</sup> It is not easy to imagine the Pharisees trailing Jesus and his disciples into the open fields on a Sabbath day. Moreover, it is somewhat unusual that what is being called into question is the behavior of the disciples. We already noticed that Luke remedies the situation by making Jesus the object of the challenge. Still, the story preserves elements that are an integral part of the tradition. The appeal to the conduct of David and his men seems a bit out of focus. The two activities being compared do not quite belong to the same order. One has to do with matters of worship in the realm of the sacred, while the other is a question of law. It may also be said that the saying “The Son of man is Lord of the sabbath,” is a secondary development within the tradition.<sup>9</sup>

At the core of the Marcan story is the saying, “The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.” This is, without a doubt, one of the most radical statements Jesus ever made. Its very radicalness, which argues for its authenticity, may have been the reason Matthew and Luke decided to omit it from their accounts. The closest thing to it that may be found within Judaism is a statement of a second century rabbi, who, commenting on Exodus 31:13, wrote: “The Sabbath was given to you, not you to the Sabbath.”<sup>10</sup> We need not labor the point that it is not quite the same to say that the Sabbath was given for the benefit of the Jews, and to say that it was given for the benefit of humanity.

Much has been written about this pregnant saying. Most of it has had to do with what the statement denies. Thus, just to mention one example, E. Lohse has written that by means of this statement “the absolute obligation of the commandment is . . . challenged.”<sup>11</sup> However, what the statement affirms is more significant than what it

denies. To make the point that the Sabbath was made for man in no way challenges the validity of the commandment. Rather it takes it for granted and places it within a larger context. So, not even this, Jesus’ most radical statement, can in any way be construed to belong to a controversy concerning the validity of the Sabbath. (To be fair to Lohse, I should point out that he later adds, “though its validity is not contested in principle.”)

Finally, we may return to those Lukan stories that contain the doublet of the *Q* saying we already found in Matthew. In his account of the healing of the man with dropsy, the Pharisees are present,

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but they are silent throughout. Confronted by the man, Jesus opens fire with the question, “is it lawful to heal on the sabbath, or not?” Then, after healing the man, he justifies his action with a version of the *Q* saying (Luke 14:5). The question clearly states the point at issue.

The other Lukan story allows for some more important observations. The story of Jesus’ healing of the woman with the spirit of infirmity does not itself include the *Q* saying. After the healing, a ruler of a synagogue takes center stage and rebukes the people saying, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days to be healed, and not on the sabbath day” (Luke 13:14). To this directive Jesus responds, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?”

This whole scene reflects most openly the Lukan agenda, as the following redactional comment reveals, “As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at

all the glorious things that were done by him” (Luke 13:17). The story elaborates on the Lukan appropriation of the passage from Isaiah 61, the text for Jesus’ sermon at the synagogue at Nazareth. It promises release to the captives on the acceptable day of the Lord, thus causing all the people to rejoice.

## *Not Whether, but How*

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From the above analysis, we may conclude that there are five different kinds of references to the Sabbath in the Synoptic tradition. A close examination reveals that none of these items in any way questions the validity of the Sabbath *per se*. On the contrary, they take it for granted.

(1) Historical reminiscences of the burial of Jesus and redactional statements from the agenda of the authors that *assume* the obligation of the Sabbath rest among Christians.

(2) The aphorism “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

(3) The affirmation “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath,” or versions in the form of a question.

(4) Appeals to what was common practice among Jews in caring for animals or children.

(5) Proof texts from the Old Testament quoted to defend activities some were questioning. Since some of the material is polemical, one needs to determine what is the nature of the controversy.

Until now it has been assumed by modern New Testament scholarship that the controversy is between Christians and Jews. In other words, Jesus is presented as challenging the Jews, who wish to maintain the Sabbath law by declaring the Sabbath obsolete.<sup>12</sup>

Such understanding of the evidence is clearly prejudiced. These controversies do not represent either Jesus or the early Christians involved in a dispute with Jewish opponents. As we have noticed, not even the most radical piece of evidence challenges the validity of the Sabbath.

Rather, the dispute concerns whether this or that activity was to be considered lawful on a Sabbath. The evidence shows that within the Christian communities the question was not whether to keep the Sabbath, but how. Indeed questions of how to observe the Sabbath remained a major concern, just as it had been at the synagogues where these Christians had worshipped prior to their becoming disciples of the Crucified.

What we have in the gospels is the evidence of how Christians of Jewish and Gentile origin, inside and outside of Palestine, continued to carry on their worship services on the Sabbath. Like all other Jews and Godfearers<sup>13</sup> of the time, they were trying to determine *how to* observe the Sabbath rest by establishing which kinds of activities were lawful and which were not. These were internal controversies, and not of the kind where some stand outside denying its validity, and others are inside affirming it. Rather, both sides of the debate presuppose the validity of observing the Sabbath.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. See J. Gladson, “Taming Historical Criticism: Adventist Biblical Scholarship in the Land of the Giants,” *Spectrum*, 18:4 (April 1988), p. 20.

2. C. E. is an abbreviation for Common Era. It is equivalent to A. D. (Anno Domini, “in the year of our Lord”). We use C. E., along with many scholars, out of respect for our readers whose commitment is to a religion

other than the Christian religion.

3. *New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978).

4. For full documentation see G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 181.

5. A. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), pp. 50, 51.

6. One of the best examples of the punch line appearing on different lips is when Luke gives the great commandment to the lawyer, Luke 10:27.

7. New Testament scholars call a doublet a saying that developed into two versions in the oral tradition and appears twice in the same gospel.

8. See Hultgren, *Ibid.*, p. 112.

9. On the secondary character of Mark 2:28, see V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 220; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1959), p. 118; D. E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 106; W. F. Beare, "The Sabbath Was Made for Man," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1960), p. 135; A. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, pp. 113, 114. For a review of the argument see, M. D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London: SPCK 1967), pp. 94, 175-177.

10. See C. G. Vermes, *Ibid.*, p. 180 for full documentation.

11. E. Lohse, "Sabbaton," in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, T. Kittel ed., vol. 7, p. 22.

12. H. Braun, *Jesus of Nazareth; the Man and His Times* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 58-61; W. Rordorf, *Sunday* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 62, 63; E. Stauffer, "Neue Wege der Jesusforschung" *Gottes ist der Orient* (Berlin: Toepelmann, 1959), p. 167; S. Schulz, *Die Stunde der Vortschaft* (Hamburg: Surche, 1967), p. 85; E. Schweizer, *Good News According to Mark* (Richmond: Knox, 1975), p. 40. It may be pointed out, however, that there are non-Adventist scholars who have denied that the abrogation of the Sabbath is being declared here. See, for example, M. J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Mellen, 1984), p. 151.

13. Those Gentiles who had been attracted to Judaism and its synagogues and who participated in some Jewish ritual, but who had not become proselytes, are identified as "Godfearers." Cornelius is said to have been one (Acts 10:2).