

HOLY TRANSGRESSION: Breaking the Sabbath *in Order to Keep It*

In his New Testament letter, James says that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (2:10).¹ He follows this claim with an example, citing two of the Ten Commandments, noting that “if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law” (2:11). In other words, to break one commandment breaks them all. It is not hard to see why early Seventh-day Adventists relished this text so much, for it gave them the ability to claim to other Christian groups that by “breaking” the fourth commandment regarding the Sabbath (worshiping on Sunday rather than Saturday), they were guilty of transgressing the Law entirely. Thus, in their logic, Christians had to care about

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the issue of the Sabbath since it was paramount that it be kept in order to be found right with God.

But did these early Adventists provide a too-naïve reading of Scripture—which many conservative-leaning Adventists still repeat? There are several questions that they typically never asked: *what* defines a “transgression” for James, and *whether* a person’s beliefs about the Law affect how they are judged according to his letter? At first glance these questions might seem superfluous. Adventists typically believe that sin is the “transgression of the law” and that a person’s beliefs do not affect the objective truth of God’s judgment against lawbreakers. Yet, both of these classic answers are at odds with James’s message.

For the very same passage warns: “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). God will judge transgressors of the Law with mercy if they themselves, regardless of their transgressions, are merciful to others because we are under “the law of liberty” (2:12). This is the same author who defines sin/lawbreaking as being when someone “knows the right thing to do [has embodied convictions] and fails to do it” (4:17). Equally shocking, James notes that sin itself, following temptation, does *not* cause someone to suffer the penalty of death, but

rather sin must be allowed to build, and only when it is "fully grown" can it reap deadly consequences (1:14-15).

In other words, according to James, transgressing the Law can only be done if someone is convicted that they purposefully transgressed the Law (including, if not specifically, the Ten Commandments). Likewise, while the purposeful transgression of one law means the transgression of the entire Law as a superstructure, the transgression, although a sin, does not bring death by merely the single transgression. In fact, it will be met with mercy at the judgment as long as the person who transgressed has been merciful to others. Contrary to the knee-jerk reactions of some, this isn't some relativistic postmodern ethic, but a perspective found in Scripture from nearly 2,000 years ago. Truly, as the postmodern-esque book of Ecclesiastes says, "there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9).

Putting aside the fact that a close reading of James reveals a completely different message than classical Adventism once assumed, the better question is this: where did James get these ideas? Do these radical views suggest that Martin Luther was right to desire that the book be de-canonized and thrown out of the Bible? Is James promoting rebellion and a lax view of God's Law? Or, quite the opposite, does James express here the deepest truths of the Gospels?

1. Paul and James: On the Same Page

Although it is a common refrain to emphasize the supposed rivalry between the apostle Paul and the leader of the Jerusalem church, there are reasons to suspect that the rumors are overblown. Traditionally, we focus on the emphasis James gives to good works being necessary for faith versus statements by Paul that seem to suggest the opposite. Yet, as many have noted, the distinction is more of emphasis than quality. Even in his letter to the Galatians, Paul never condemns James, only some men claiming to come from him.

In truth, we have no ability to confirm whether the letter of James was written by the same James "the Just" who led the church in Jerusalem. It could be from another early Christian with the same name (there were many), or it could be a compilation of various writers from the circle of James, representing a sort of Christian version of Proverbs. In any case, the book's view of the Law's transgression and personal conviction match Paul's own articulations in Romans 14.

There and in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul reacts to and rejects part of the first decision made by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:28-29), arguing that the

prohibition against eating meats offered to idols does not, as the council had said, stem from the Holy Spirit, but simply human superstition (1 Cor. 8:1-11). He argues later in another letter that "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (Rom. 14:14). He goes on to note: "The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:22-23).

For Paul, the rules regarding unclean and clean animals found in Leviticus and ancient Israelite tradition are not an objective issue. The Israelites obeyed them because they were convicted that they should. Paul and other Christians, on the other hand, came to lose this conviction. As such, both were right. As he notes, "some believe in eating *anything*" (Rom. 14:2),² and these people, he says, are not judged by God negatively, despite the fact that they are seemingly disregarding or breaking the laws in the Torah to do so. "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain [despise here means judge them as inferior], and those who abstain [i.e., those who are convicted they should observe those laws] must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them" (Rom. 14:3).³

Expounding on this idea, Paul notes one more example which is of particular importance: holy days. "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (Rom. 14:5). Despite efforts from Adventists to disconnect this statement from the issue of the Sabbath, it is clear that one cannot do so. Those who "judge all days to be alike" by logical necessity must ignore the peculiarity of the seventh-day Sabbath (as well, we might add, any claim for the Lord's Day on Sunday!). This text clearly does not deny the Sabbath's continued observance in early Christianity, nor does it advocate for its end. In fact, we could even guess that since in verse 2 Paul lists the position he favors *first*, that the same might be true here: Paul himself is one of those who believes that some days are more holy than others.

The bigger point is not what Paul personally believes about the issue but the fact that he notes: "Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord" (14:6a). Likewise, with regard to the foods eaten: "those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks

to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God" (14:6b). In other words, Paul's message is that the legalistic concern of *whether* to honor a holy day is less important than whether you have a conviction about it and how you *treat* others who have different convictions about it.

For some more conservative-leaning Adventists, this may sound absurd. Most of the rhetoric about the Sabbath in our denomination has revolved around the idea that the Sabbath was not changed. Since the Law of God is eternal, we are required to observe it and tell others to do so, too. Yet, according to Romans 14, Paul doesn't believe that such issues should spark "quarreling over opinions" (14:1) but instead create a space of love and mutual respect between believers where all can worship together in peace and harmony.

Intriguingly, we run into the same issue with Paul that we find in James: sin is defined not as an objective standard which condemns you whether you know it or not, but rather as a judgment by God toward your subjective convictions and how you act based upon them. As Paul makes clear elsewhere, "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin ... Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me" (Rom. 7:7-10). The issue is not that the Law is flawed, as some erroneously have understood Paul; it's that sin for Paul is only possible if you *believe* that something you do is forbidden and *then* continue to do it.

As he states, "I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (7:7-8). If Paul covets before believing that the Law represents God's true will, then he does not sin. But if he is



St. John the Evangelist as a young man without a beard and St. Paul with a book, 1100s in Ovraby church, Sweden.

convicted that God's commandment is true and he shouldn't covet, his covetousness now produces abundant transgressions. The issue for Paul isn't the Law itself, but our convictions about it. So where does this idea (shared by Paul and James) that defines sin based on our convictions *about* the Law or sin come from? How are they able to connect it to the Ten Commandments, and even by implication for Paul, specifically the fourth?

2. Jesus Redefines the Sabbath

In the end, almost everything always comes back to Jesus. Or, at least, it's supposed to, according to Jesus himself (Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39). When Jesus appears on the Mount of Transfiguration, flanked on either side by Moses and Elijah, the point isn't that Jesus is authorized by or equal to those others (such as Peter may mistakenly assume at first). Rather, the message for the disciples arrives when Moses and Elijah disappear and only Jesus is left. "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to *him!*" (Mark 9:7). As Zane Yi noted in a recent study on the conflict of hermeneutics, when it came to questions of whether and how to obey the laws of Moses, or to apply the counsel of Israel's prophets, Mark's message is that it is to Jesus alone that we should turn.⁴

With that in mind, let us look at one of the aspects

of Jesus' ministry that early Christians remembered the most: his conflicts with the religious leaders over the Sabbath. It's also an issue that many Christians potentially misunderstand. When discussing these texts, most Adventists spend their time defending Jesus from the charge that he broke the Sabbath. The argument usually focuses on passages like Matthew 12:9-14 where Jesus debates with the Pharisees as to whether it is legal to do healing work on the Sabbath. Obviously, there's no passage in the Torah that forbids this, and so, Adventists point out that Jesus is breaking the *interpretation* of the Pentateuchal Law, *not* the Law itself. Those arguments are certainly valid for passages such as those, but they generally ignore the passages where arguably, Jesus *does* break the Sabbath, at least according to the first five books of the Bible.

Perhaps the single most important passage for understanding Jesus' perspective on the Sabbath is Mark 2:23-28. Jesus' disciples have been picking grain on the Sabbath, an act forbidden by God in Exodus 16:27-30. God describes anyone seeking to gather food on the Sabbath as "refus[ing] to keep my commandments and instructions" (16:28). In the Book of Numbers, the Israelites stone a man to death (supposedly by God's direct order) because he is seen picking up sticks he needs during the Sabbath hours (15:32-36). Thus, when the disciples of Jesus gather grain on the Sabbath, they are intentionally breaking the same prohibition.

This is why the Pharisees are so incensed. This isn't just breaking the *interpretation* of the Sabbath that men had come up with through tradition, but also the interpretation that *God* supposedly gave in the Scriptures. What is Jesus' response? Well, he admits that they are breaking the Sabbath. In his response, Jesus cites a story about David who "entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is *not lawful* for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions" (Mark 2:26). Why did David, a "man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), break the Law given by God in the Pentateuch? Because "he and his companions were hungry and in need of food" (2:25).

The argument Jesus gives is stunning in its hermeneutical simplicity: if David broke God's Law and was never punished or reprimanded by God because of his human need (and because to observe the Law would have harmed his livelihood), then my disciples can break the Sabbath-gathering law in order to feed themselves with God's approval. As if that isn't shocking enough,

Jesus redefines the Sabbath: "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man [or: humanity] is lord [master] even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Jesus claims that the Sabbath's purpose is to bless human beings (it was made *only* for their benefit), and it was not intended as a rule to be followed to the detriment of human blessing.

Ellen White commented on the passage in 1877:

If excessive hunger excused David for violating even the holiness of the sanctuary, and made his act guiltless, how much more excusable was the simple act of the disciples in plucking the grain and eating it upon the Sabbath day. Jesus would teach his disciples and his enemies that the service of God was first of all; and, if fatigue and hunger attended the work, it was right to satisfy the wants of humanity, even upon the Sabbath day. That holy institution was not given to interfere with the needs of our being, bringing pain, and discomfort, instead of blessings... [The Sabbath was] not to be a grievous burden.⁵

When combined with the disciples' actions and the citation of David, this statement ends up presenting the following argument: the law (whether the Sabbath or priestly restrictions) is contingent on its original intention of blessing. In other words, if the Sabbath was made in order to bless humans, but keeping it perfectly under specific conditions causes harm to life, then it is not transgressing the Sabbath when you don't keep it, but actually honoring its original intention when you alter it. In order to keep the Sabbath, Jesus says, sometimes you must be willing to break it. Alternatively, keeping the Sabbath so that it becomes a curse or non-blessing for you means betraying and sinning against the Sabbath's original purpose.

Jesus defends this paradoxical idea in his claim that "the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:28). On one level, Jesus is stating that as Son of Man (a messianic title), he is free as a representative of God to interpret the Sabbath as he sees fit. This is certainly the way Matthew and Luke understand it, for when they copied this statement from Mark's Gospel, they left out the other part of the quotation. But on another level, it potentially proclaims that humanity is lord of the Sabbath as well. Jesus originally spoke Aramaic and in that language "son of man" can either mean "human being" or the messianic title. It may well be that Jesus is

aware of this wordplay and intends a double meaning.

Notice that the text of Mark (and Matthew and Luke) never claims that Jesus instructed his disciples to pick the grain. A close reading leads one to assume that they pick it according to their own judgment. Jesus' statement then suggests that if the Sabbath is meant for human blessing, it is also human beings who must determine when keeping the Sabbath strictly or liberally provides that blessing. They must, on their own conviction (do you hear Paul?), determine when to break the specific articulation of the Law so as to ensure they are still keeping the underlying principle. Jesus, as the perfect human (1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Pet. 2:22), represents not only the authority of the Messiah to interpret the Sabbath, but God's intention for any human being to do so (Mark 2:27).

As one discovers with much of Jesus' teaching, this isn't entirely original to him. In the second century (B.C.E.) Maccabean rebellion against Antiochus IV Epiphanes (the victory which is now celebrated as Hanukkah), a similar issue arose. As told in 1 Maccabees 2:27-41, some Jews believe that they are required not to work on the Sabbath and so, though they are fighting a war, they refuse to move or fight on their weekly holy day. Knowing this, Antiochus waits until Sabbath and then murders them all while they pray.

The passage states that when the Jews saw their enemies coming, "they did not answer them or hurl a stone at them or block up their hiding places, for they said, 'Let us all die in our innocence'... So they attacked them on the sabbath, and they died, with their wives and children and livestock, to the number of a thousand persons" (1 Macc. 2:36-38). *The Sabbath killed them.*

Those who would become the later (and successful) Maccabean kings took note: "If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the Gentiles for our lives and for our ordinances, they will quickly destroy us from the earth" (2:40). And so a decision was reached: "Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding places" (2:41). The point Jesus is making to the Pharisees is a reminder of a principle established during the Maccabean rebellion: in order to keep the Sabbath, sometimes you may need to break it.

Like Paul, the issues for the Maccabees and Jesus are *intention* and *conviction*. This is illustrated beautifully by an *agrapha* or oral tradition about Jesus recorded in *Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis*, an early copy of the New Testament. According to the story, right after the Sabbath controversy with the Pharisees, "[Jesus] saw

someone working on the sabbath and said to him, 'Mister, if you know what you're doing, congratulations to you, but if you don't, to hell with you, you are nothing but a lawbreaker.'⁶ The language is stark, but the message is in line with Jesus, Paul, and James. It all comes down to whether "you know what you're doing." Like Paul, the issue is about where one's heart is and how that affects one's interpretation of Scripture.

3. Lifting the Burdens of Scripture

This creates an interesting question about Jesus' hermeneutics of Scripture. Is there anything he taught that reinforces this idea that the Sabbath and the Law in general must be evaluated contextually and individually? In the Gospel of Matthew (and in a leaner version in Mark 10:1-12), some Pharisees confront Jesus, asking him whether it is lawful to divorce a woman "for any cause" (Matt. 19:5). While it is possible to imagine that they are only focused on the issue of limitations, the second part of their question in verse 7 appears to presume that they already understood Moses to allow it when they asked. In other words, this situation appears analogous to the other attempts by the Sadducees or Pharisees to *trap* Jesus by provoking him to say something heretical or politically incorrect, such as when he is asked about whether to pay taxes (Matt. 22:15-22).

Jesus' answer to their inquiry is both surprising and in line with his approach toward the Sabbath. He begins to answer their question, rooted in the final book of the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy), by citing the first book in it (Genesis). He pits the scriptural principles for human marriage outlined at the beginning of the Torah against the conditioned specific instructions from Sinai delivered to the Israelites. In other words, it appears that he is arguing that there is a contradiction *within* the Pentateuch regarding marriage and that the Pharisees should dismiss Deuteronomy's instructions.

Clearly sensing the problem, they respond: "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal to divorce her?" (Matt. 19:7). Jesus' response is even more surprising the second time. Instead of defending some sort of harmony between the two, or reaffirming the inerrancy of God's words, Jesus dismisses them with the flick of his hand (or rather, an argument). He replies: "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (19:8). To the horror of fundamentalists, Jesus is practicing and promoting the "historical critical method" of biblical interpretation. Not only is he arguing that the laws of the

Bible were given in conditional and contextual times, limited in their use and utility, and that this specific command was given due to human desire (rather than God's), but he is also claiming that the very words themselves are not from God but Moses. (Contrary to Jesus, the book of Deuteronomy is clear that the Law comes from the eternal edict of God, Deut. 24:1-4)!

Putting aside the implications of Jesus' inclination for "higher criticism" (a subject worthy of its own study), what is perhaps most stunning about his reply is that Jesus does not negate the Mosaic Law as part of Scripture. Although he dismisses the passage and argues it is contradictory to the principles in Genesis, he does not argue like Marcion or others that it must not be part of the *true* Scripture. Rather, Jesus' vision of the Torah allows it to be incorrect in parts or requires human logic to sort through it. This does not, for him, invalidate it. As Jesus notes elsewhere in Matthew: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (5:17). But what are we to do with the fact that the book of Deuteronomy itself gives no hint of what Jesus said? Is this a revelation that could only come from Jesus? No.

In fact, Jesus appears to condemn the Pharisees for not *already* figuring it out. "Have you not read?" he asks them incredulously. In short, Jesus expects that even when the text of Deuteronomy says God said something that contradicted his earlier purposes, we will know God well enough through Scripture to recognize the contradiction, correct or balance it out (such as citing Genesis), and even speculate whether the "divine" words betray historical human motivations. The fact that they didn't have a prophet or the Messiah to confirm those things is no excuse for their lack of spiritual courage to do so themselves earlier.

As if that isn't enough, Jesus proceeds to speak to his disciples, who are in shock from what they have heard. Some of them are in doubt as to whether marriage is even worth pursuing. In response, Jesus takes aim at the very book that he used to combat Deuteronomy's rule on divorce. "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth ... for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," he tells them (Matt. 19:12). In the first century, a eunuch was a person who did not share the typical sexuality of the majority (such as being asexual or some other way that would not lead to procreation). Thus, what Jesus claims—about some eunuchs being born the way they are and intended as such by God for his kingdom purposes—flies in the face of God's words in Genesis 1:28 where he directly

commands *all* humans: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Jesus is an equal opportunity offender for Scripture: using Genesis to push back against Deuteronomy and perhaps drawing on Isaiah 56:3-8 to push against Genesis (and Deut. 23:1).

As the consensus among scholars has long recognized: "certain teachings of the Bible were clearly more significant to Jesus than others."⁷ Watching Jesus perform these exegetical jumps is certainly fascinating, but what is the underlying principle that undergirds these hermeneutical moves? On the one hand, we notice that Jesus argues that "in the beginning it was not so," suggesting that the *original intention or foundation* of a law or command from God *overrides* the specific adapted applications of that principle in Israel's history. However, what defends the eunuch argument? For that we have to turn to another passage in Matthew.

Later in that Gospel, Jesus, noting that "the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat," warns that the disciples are not to copy *how* they *interpret* Scripture. Moses' seat is a place of authority in which the community grants them the ability to read and interpret the Torah and explain it to the people. Jesus cautions: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Matt. 23:1-4). The burdens spoken of are interpretive/hermeneutical. Jesus is accusing them of *choosing* to interpret the laws of Scripture in such a way that they always make them more difficult for peoples' lives. Jesus is not saying that their burdens are not defensible, but rather that they have a *choice* to be either more conservative (adding burdens) or liberal (lifting the burdens). Their choice to add more complicated interpretations, but not to choose to be more liberal and take away burdens, is condemnable because their interpretive choices are not aligned with the *intention* of God.

In short, Jesus argues that his disciples and the Christian community are to utilize the opposite hermeneutic of the Pharisees. They are always to interpret Scripture in a way that is more liberal or liberating, a way in which the Bible is respected as authoritative, but the choice of interpretation by humans is recognized and harnessed for the benefit of others. (Hear echoes of his teaching about the Sabbath?) In Luke's Gospel, it is "the lawyers" who are singled out in this regard (to make the point about hermeneutics equally clear), and Jesus simply notes: "Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them" and



James Tissot, *The Disciples Eat Wheat on the Sabbath*, 1886-1894. Brooklyn Museum, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

argues that “you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering” (Luke 11:45-46, 52).

What we discover through a close reading of the New Testament is that this hermeneutical orientation of Jesus is central to his understanding of Scripture and how it is to shape and be shaped by Christians. As Jesus notes elsewhere in Matthew: “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (13:52). Interpreting the Scriptures for the sake of the Kingdom is like being *master or lord* of a house and includes the ability to add new ideas to the old so that the old is transformed. Sounds a lot like what Jesus says in Mark 2:27-28.

As we saw in Romans 14, Paul is such a scribe. Yet that isn’t the only time. Paul even applies Jesus’ hermeneutics to Christ’s own words, the incarnate Word of God. In his first letter to the Corinthians, when repeating Jesus’ teaching about divorce, Paul argues

that his churches are “not bound” to those historical words because: “It is to peace that God has called you” (1 Cor. 7:15). His argument is that if Jesus’ overall trajectory and underlying principle are to develop and further the peace of God, then if a spouse wants a divorce, we should not deny him or her that possibility because we feel bound to obey Jesus’ historical teachings (7:13, 15). Paul’s argument is this: to be bound to Jesus’ teaching and not grant divorce to a spouse would create the opposite of peace in the household, and this would betray the very reason that Jesus gave the divorce teaching in the first place. Furthermore, Paul can say this unapologetically, “I say—I and not the Lord,” (7:12) because as a scribe of the Kingdom, he can add new treasures to the old. Whereas Chak Him Chow argues that “Paul’s divergence from Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce should already indicate that Paul’s position ... is so extraordinary as to rival that of Jesus,”⁹ a closer examination of the context reveals that there is no rivalry at work, for Paul is simply imitating what Jesus himself did.

4. Transgressing the Law in Order to Honor It

This idea might even be more paradoxical. What if the idea of transgressing the commandments of God is not merely a result of the sinful conditions of the world, but an intrinsic quality of their very intention? The philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes that human rights are, at their core, the right to transgress the Ten Commandments. It is simultaneously true that the Law of God implores the Israelites to love their neighbor (Lev. 19:17-18), which in order to do so “calls for an activity *beyond* the confines of the Law, enjoining us always to do more and more.” He argues, “one can see how human rights and ‘love for thy neighbour’ qua Real are the two aspects of the same gesture of going beyond the Decalogue.” But he also carefully notes that “human rights are not simply opposed to the Ten Commandments, but are the ‘inherent transgression’ generated by those Commandments.” In other words, he argues, “there is no space for human rights outside the terrain of the Decalogue.”⁹ The Law of God, as Jesus appears to demonstrate, works in just this way: it encourages the transgression when transgression itself fulfills the Law’s purpose to love one’s neighbor.

From a Jewish perspective, Rabbi Daniel Hartman notes a similar idea in his book *Putting God Second*, arguing that “by putting God second, we put God’s will first.”¹⁰ The idea stems from his conviction that much of the world’s religious fundamentalism stems from

"God intoxication," in which a person becomes blind to the lives and needs of others and only sees people in relationship to religious demands. Reclaiming the true message of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, he argues, "requires rediscovering a religious system that does not merely attempt to balance love of God with love of neighbor but that clearly prioritizes love of neighbor over love of God."¹¹ Paradoxically, in putting God first above our neighbor, we actually fail God's purposes and desires for us and our worship. However, when we place the neighbor before us and our religious beliefs, we act in harmony with God's purposes to bless humanity. "Thus, truly to walk with God is to walk with human beings through all of our shared struggles and needs."¹² We put God second for the sake of our neighbor, but in so doing, we lift God through our neighbor to the most exalted and highest position.

When applied to the Law of God in Scripture, Hartman argues (utilizing the Jewish philosopher Maimonides) that "we must in essence make going beyond the requirement of the law the ultimate law" and it is by going "beyond" that "pushes those who follow the tradition not to feel religiously satisfied by merely doing what is written, creating a space for the ethical in instances where the law itself fails." In short, "it demands a redefinition of what constitutes the law."¹³ As Hartman notes, the Jewish Talmud argues in one particular passage that the temple of Jesus' day wasn't destroyed because the people failed to keep the Law, but "because they *only* followed the law, and did not go beyond it" (b. B. Mes. 2:8, VI.7.K).¹⁴

For many more conservative-leaning individuals (especially Adventists), this may come across as frightening in its implications. Didn't Ellen White warn that "to knowingly transgress the holy commandment forbidding labor upon the seventh day is a crime in the sight of Heaven which was of such magnitude under the Mosaic law as to require the death of the offender" and that not only that, but it was such a sin that "God would not take a transgressor of His law to heaven," but he must instead "suffer the second death, which was full and final penalty of the transgressor"?¹⁵ With those words of warning echoing in our minds (and the fear and dread they bring), it is understandable that we might believe that this way of thinking leads us to eternal perdition.

And yet, however strange to many Adventist ears, this way of thinking does not violate Ellen White's warning. When commenting on the Sabbath in *The Desire of Ages* (1898), she reflects on Mark 2:27-28:

"The object of God's work in this world is the redemption of man; therefore that which is necessary to be done on the Sabbath in the accomplishment of this work is in accord with the Sabbath law."¹⁶ In more modern language: If the intention of God is the blessing of man, anything that needs to be done for that purpose, even if it is "work" (transgressing the *words* of the fourth commandment but not the *spirit* of the law), is not only acceptable to God, but *necessary*.

5. Jesus, Saturday, and Perceiving God Correctly

Unbeknownst to many, the early Christians did in fact preserve a tradition of Jesus encouraging Sabbath observance. The recently discovered *Gospel of Thomas* reports one previously unknown statement attributed to Jesus regarding the Sabbath. The Gospel, first unburied in a few Greek fragments at Oxyrhynchus in the 1890s and then fully in a Coptic manuscript discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, consists of 114 sayings of Jesus (a good half of which are alternative versions of the same sayings we have in the canonical Gospels). The book, which was not actually written by the apostle Thomas and probably stems from the early second century, records various oral traditions Christians remembered about Jesus' teachings.

In saying 27, it reports: "Jesus said, 'If you do not fast to the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not keep the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the Father.'"¹⁷ Here, Jesus is remembered for having taught Sabbath observance. However, the authenticity of the statement is questionable. Would Jesus teach Sabbath-observing Jews about the Kingdom? It seems strange to imagine him teaching them to do something they already know how to do. On the other hand, during the second century there *were* Jewish Christian groups that defended a law-observant Christianity against Christian groups represented by Ignatius of Antioch or the *Letter of Barnabas*, which asserted that Christians shouldn't "Judaize" or celebrate the Sabbath. Could this "saying" of Jesus have been invented in order to combat such assertions? It's certainly possible.

On the other hand, the statement in the *Gospel of Thomas* about the Sabbath doesn't engage in any debate about whether to *keep* the Sabbath or the *date* upon which to keep it, both being the sorts of concerns that were present in the second century debates. Instead, it is focused on *how* to keep the Sabbath: "as a Sabbath." It assumes that the audience *does* keep the Sabbath already, which in the second century would still refer to the seventh day of the week, not the

Lord's Day tradition on the first. In other words, Jesus is presented as teaching that if you don't keep the Sabbath *appropriately*, as a fast from the world (perhaps as a *rest*), than you will "not see the Father." The latter statement need not necessarily reference salvation, but could use "see" as a synonym for "perceive," suggesting that those who honor the Sabbath with rest are able to gain an understanding of God that others do not have.⁴

If this is the intended meaning, then it becomes at least possible that the saying *might* echo the authentic memories of Jesus' teachings. While it's certainly possible that a Jewish-Christian group came up with this statement to argue why Sabbath observance is still good for Christians, the idea that Jesus may have encouraged Christians to "keep the Sabbath as a Sabbath" in order to perceive the love of God also makes sense. If the statement is seen in the light of Jesus' other teachings, it would seek to redirect Jesus' audiences to return to the original purpose of Sabbath in the way they keep it, one which would invite them to understand God differently. That would certainly match the historical Jesus.

Regardless of whether the statement in the *Gospel of Thomas* records an echo of forgotten tradition about Jesus or reflects the habit of Christians to creatively invent new sayings of Jesus to fit their evolving circumstances, it presents to modern Christians a portrait of Jesus that is in accordance with his teachings and helpful to our faithful orientation. Jesus's intention was never to get rid of the Sabbath, to denigrate it, or to dismiss its role in faith. He wanted to get his audience to return to the core principle of the Sabbath, and in so doing, discover the love of a God who welcomes faithful disobedience, such as Jacob or Jesus' own disciples

exhibited. By understanding the Sabbath controversies, one discovers the Law anew.

6. Conclusion

In the end, a review of Jesus' teachings about the Sabbath, both canonical and apocryphal, reveals a surprising consistency and emphasis on the same paradox: the Law of God will not pass away, but it will indeed at times be broken *out of faith*, a faith that *fulfills* its original purposes. That the Sabbath is, as Adventists have long argued, unchanged in Scripture from Saturday to Sunday is as demonstrable as it is passé. The Sabbath's date is only important in so far as it helps to serve our understanding of the Sabbath's intended blessing. To quote the conclusion of Zane Yi's study on Jesus and the Law:

Is it possible, to quote the great theologian Bono, who in "11 O'Clock Tick Tock," sings: "We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong." Is it possible there are better questions we could have been and could be asking? What if we seriously started asking a different question as individuals and a community—How did, and would, Jesus interpret the Bible?¹⁸

In answer to Yi's prompt, this article has attempted to answer that question within the context of our very identity as *Seventh-day* Adventists. A theology of the Sabbath, if it is to serve God's desire in Scripture, must focus on the *why* of Sabbath, not the *when*. It cannot rely on arguments from authority or the Law as a cheap excuse for not engaging in arguments regarding Christ's

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emphasis on its utility. For as Jesus makes clear: the Sabbath is almost all about utility. This is even made clear in both versions of the Ten Commandments. In the version in Deuteronomy, the reason for the Sabbath is simply stated: “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). In other words: God gave you the Sabbath as a rest from the unceasing 24/7 work schedule Egypt oppressed you with and to remind you that God wishes you rest and well-being.

Similarly, in the more familiar version recorded in Exodus, God declares that the reason for the Sabbath is because “in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it” (20:11). Contrary to Adventists who have tried to read this verse as promoting the Sabbath as a “memorial of creation,” the passage in Exodus says nothing of the sort. Though it strikes us as strange, the text literally states that the Israelites are to “rest” in *imitation* of God who rested from his work. What they are to “remember” in keeping the Sabbath is not the creation, but God’s rest from his work. As a group of foreign slaves from Egypt raised to work every day and hurt themselves in the promotion of another’s greed, they are not to continue such behavior (nor practice it themselves against their own communities). Like a parent asking his children to copy his behavior, or a teacher instructing a student to imitate her, God instructs the Israelites to *copy* the divine habit of resting after work as a way to teach them a habit they themselves are unaccustomed to. And unlike the version in Deuteronomy that is specific to Israel, this “rest” is implied by Exodus to be desired by God for *all* of humanity.

As Jesus said from the beginning: the Sabbath was made for humanity’s benefit. He simply read the Bible better than many Christians often have, Adventists included. Reflecting on this hermeneutic that Christ puts forward, which is attested to consistently through the Gospels, and which writers like Paul and James carry forward and expand, how might we as Adventists learn to embrace Paul’s teaching about holy days? How might we proudly embrace, like Paul likely does, the celebration of the Sabbath, while not judging others who are convicted that every day is alike? I don’t propose to have all the answers, only the desire to provoke our

Church (and others) to start thinking about what they might be. In short, I’m asking how we can embrace the seventh day and its blessing personally and corporately, but evangelize about the Sabbath to others in a way that focuses not on the *day* but the *purpose* of that day? That sounds like a purpose worthy of the Three Angels’ Messages in our hyper-capitalist, consumer-driven, overworked, and underpaid world. Come out of Babylon, come out of Egypt: “a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9)!

Endnotes

1. All quotations of the Bible come from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).
2. Any words italicized in quotations are not original to the author, but added by me for emphasis.
3. It is possible that Paul was a hypocrite himself for warning others not to judge those with different beliefs (since he calls those who abstain “weak in faith” in Rom. 14:1), or perhaps he is actually quoting what he believes is a statement of Jesus that was not recorded in the Gospels (compare Jesus’s words in Mark 7:19). There is no way to prove the last idea, but the inconsistency between the statement and Paul’s actual practice in the passage is intriguing, as is the fact that the statement appears related to a saying of Jesus already known.
4. Zani Yi, “Christ and the Conflict of Interpretations: Hermeneutics Transfigured,” *Spectrum* 45:4 (2017): 16–18.
5. Ellen White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 2 (Battle Creek, MI: Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assoc., 1877), 196.
6. Stephen J. Patterson, “Orphan Sayings and Stories,” in *The Complete Gospels*, 4th ed., ed. Robert J. Miller (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2010), 459.
7. Yi, “Christ and the Conflict of Interpretations,” 19.
8. Chak Him Chow, “Paul’s Divergence from Jesus’ Prohibition of Divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:10–16,” *Open Theology* 7 (2021): 176.
9. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (New York: Verso Books, 2000), 110–113.
10. Rabbi Daniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion From Itself* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 170.
11. Hartman, *Putting God Second*, 69.
12. *Ibid.*, 88.
13. *Ibid.*, 80.
14. The quotation is from Hartman, and he gives the citation as BT Baba Metzia 30b. I have provided instead the citation from Jacob Neusner’s academic translation. The alternative translation provided by Neusner is: “For R. Yohanan said, ‘Jerusalem was destroyed only because the rule that applied there was the strict rule of the Torah. . . . Rather, frame the matter in this way: ‘because the rule that applied there [Jerusalem] was only the strict rule of the Torah, and they did not go beyond the strict requirement of the law.’” Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 143.
15. Ellen White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1868), 533. The original manuscript, from which that particular chapter was taken, was dated Christmas Day, 1866. You can only imagine how festive and full of holiday cheer Mrs. White must have been that year.
16. Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 285.
17. Thomas O. Lambdin, “The Coptic Gospel of Thomas,” in *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into the New Testament*, ed. Bart Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22.
18. Yi, “Christ and the Conflict of Interpretations,” 21.