
Yeshua the Sabbath Breaker?

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Did Yeshua (i.e., Jesus) break the Sabbath in the grain fields of Galilee? Many say that he did, and that he thumbed his nose at the Pharisees. Some say that he did not, but that he only broke the Pharisees' man-made additions to the Law of God: their traditions and the "fences" that they put up around God's Law invented to keep people at a safe distance from actually breaking God's command.

Yet others say that he *did* in fact break the Sabbath commandment, but that he did it in order to keep a higher commandment, and used precedents in Scripture to prove his case. Read on and make up your own mind which it was.

First, here are the New Testament accounts of the incident. Following will be a brief explanation of the events, filling in for present-day readers some of what the people of the time understood well.

The accounts in scripture

Matthew 12:1–8

At that time, Yeshua went on the Sabbath day through the grain fields. His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said to him, "Behold, your disciples do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." But he said to them, "Haven't you read what David did, when he was hungry, and those who were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and ate the show bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law, that on the Sabbath day, the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath, and are guiltless? But I tell you that [something] greater than the Temple is here. But if you had known what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Mark 2:23–28

It happened that he was going on the Sabbath day through the grain fields, and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Behold, why do they do that which is not lawful on the Sabbath day?" He said to them, "Did you never read what David did, when he had need, and was hungry—he, and those who were with him? How he entered into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the show bread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and gave also to those who were with him?" He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Luke 6:1–5

Now it happened on the [second first] Sabbath, that he was going through the grain fields. His disciples plucked the heads of grain, and ate, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said to them, “Why do you do that which is not lawful to do on the Sabbath day?” Yeshua, answering them, said, “Haven’t you read what David did when he was hungry, he, and those who were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and took and ate the show bread, and gave also to those who were with him, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests alone?” He said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

The context explained

The setting of this event is probably the first of the seven weekly Sabbaths which are counted from the Passover Sabbath to the Feast of Weeks. See Luke 6:1 in the Greek, where there is an odd word – δευτεροπρωτω (deuteroproto), “second first” (i.e., the second first Sabbath). The *first* first Sabbath would have been the Passover Sabbath on 15 Aviv, which normally occurs during the week some time; i.e., not on the weekly Sabbath. This is called *the* Sabbath in Leviticus 23:11,15. The weekly Sabbath after the Passover Sabbath could then be called the, “*second* first Sabbath” to distinguish it from the great Sabbath because it is the second in Passover week as well as being the first of the seven weekly Sabbaths to *Shavuot*, or the Feast of Weeks. Bear in mind, however, that this word, ‘δευτεροπρωτω’, has confused western scholars for many centuries, because it is otherwise unknown in contemporary Greek literature, and so there are plenty of theories and disagreements over it.

Now the exact weekly Sabbath involved is not necessarily of crucial importance, but knowing it does give us a clue as to what the disciples were actually doing.

If we have correctly located the time of this incident to the first of the counted Sabbaths to Shavuot, then the first fruits of the barley crop had just been offered that week on the Feast of First fruits (which falls on 16 Aviv). This is also called the Wave Sheaf Offering.

Since the first fruits of the barley crop were already offered, this means that the barley harvesting had already commenced and was in progress. However, the Torah specifies that the corners of the fields and the gleanings (leftovers) were to be left unharvested in order to provide food for the poor and for travellers:

Leviticus 23:22 – “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap into the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest: you shall leave them for the poor, and for the foreigner. I am YHWH your God.”

Putting together the time of year (barley harvest) along with the Torah’s provision for the poor and for travellers, we have the necessary clues to understand what the disciples were doing: they were most likely availing themselves of the leftovers of the barley harvest in accordance with Torah.

So, regardless of the exact and correct interpretation of the enigmatic word ‘δευτεροπρωτω’ (= ‘deuteroproto’), we now have a good idea of what the disciples were very likely engaged in doing: that is, something that was in accordance with the Torah, which (at least on any non-Sabbath day) they were entitled to do.

What Yeshua did not say

When the Pharisees accused Yeshua’s (Jesus’) disciples of doing what is not permitted by law, he did not respond by saying in any way that their interpretation of the Law was in error, and that

his disciples were, in fact, doing what was lawful. Instead, he conceded their point and offered a defence of the action from precedents in Scripture.

Yeshua also did not respond with any version of, “You are not my boss, I’ll do what I please because I am the Son of God.” Yeshua himself was bound by God’s Law, and the defence he gave to the Pharisees had to be within the context of what was allowed by the Law, or it would have been an entirely useless defence. As we shall see, this is precisely what Yeshua did—he defended himself in accordance with Torah.

Yeshua: Master Logician

What Yeshua did say blew the socks off the Pharisees, for they had no possible response but to admit defeat on their own terms. This was probably quite humiliating to those who had thought they knew the Law, but they were no match for the perfect knowledge of the Law that Yeshua had.

This is the argument that defeated the Pharisees:

IF	(Human need is greater than Temple service)	[Premise A: $H > T$]
AND	(the Temple service is greater than the Sabbath)	[Premise B: $T > S$]
THEN	(Human need is greater than the Sabbath)	[Conclusion: $H > S$]

This is what logicians call a *valid* argument. This means that the form of the argument guarantees that the conclusion is true as long as the premises are true. Yeshua’s argument concludes: $H > S$, based on $H > T > S$, which is based on the premise that $H > T$ and $T > S$ (Human Need > Temple service and Temple service > Sabbath). Yeshua’s argument is *valid* because it is undeniably true that if $A > B$ and $B > C$ then $A > C$ also.

Because Yeshua proved both of the premises from Scripture, which all accepted as absolute truth from God, then his argument was not only *valid* but also *sound*. A *sound* argument is one that uses correct logic and true premises. A sound argument is, in effect, a proof, and this proof using the absolute truth of Scripture is what defeated the false accusation of the Pharisees.

How did Yeshua prove that human need is greater than Temple service?

Yeshua refers to the account in 1 Samuel 21, which relates an incident that occurred involving David while he was on the run from King Saul, who was trying to kill him. David and his men had not eaten for days and were starving. By this we do not mean that they had missed second breakfast. The reality of the situation was that they had not eaten for days and they were literally starving and ravenously hungry.

Now Yeshua admits that David’s eating of the show bread was unlawful for him to do, and in so doing also admitted that the actions of his own disciples were likewise unlawful. However, the High Priest who gave him the show bread to eat understood that the preservation of human life took precedence over the Temple service, and there is no hint of wrong-doing in this account. Therefore, human need, in this case, extreme hunger, took precedence over the Temple Law. Certainly, whenever there is any legitimate danger or threat to human life, then human need takes precedence over other laws, particularly as Leviticus 18:5 says that in keeping these commandments a person may live in them, not die in them!

Just as David and his men had been without food for a significant period of time, Yeshua’s own disciples were likewise in the same position. Therefore, Yeshua made the point that mercy in saving human life has higher priority than even the Temple service in the worship of the Almighty. The Pharisees could have nothing to say against this, because their own midrashes (commentaries or interpretations of Scripture) reasoned in the same way.

How did Yeshua prove that Temple service is greater than observing the Sabbath commandment?

Yeshua refers to the fact that the Temple priests must profane (“make common”) the Sabbath by working on it in order to perform their Temple worship duties. He makes the point that the priests in so doing were guiltless for the reason that they are commanded to do this work by the Torah. In cases such as this, a positive command (a “thou shalt”) of the Torah takes precedence over a negative command (a “thou shalt not”). As in Yeshua’s other argument regarding David and the show bread, the Pharisees could have nothing at all to say about this because their own midrashes or Scripture commentaries confirmed this principle.

Case Closed

Since Yeshua proved his two premises both from Scripture and from the Pharisees’ own midrashes, his larger argument is proved by force of logic alone. This was a humiliating defeat for the Pharisees, which Yeshua rubbed in further by saying that if they had known what, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,” meant, then they would not have condemned the guiltless, those being his followers who *were* working on the Sabbath by harvesting and winnowing grain to eat in order to alleviate severe hunger.

Inspiration

Note that the idea and inspiration for this article came after having flipped through a book back in 2014, which presented the core thesis of the present work.