

THE SABBATH AND THE REIGN OF GOD: THE SABBATH IN THE GOSPELS AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST THEOLOGY

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Abstract In John 5:17, Jesus simply defended His healing of the crippled man at Bethesda by replying to the Jews that, “My Father is working.... And I Myself am working.” This is in fact encapsulates the broader theme of Jesus’ defences against accusations of Sabbath violations. It is striking that in the exchanges over the Sabbath, Jesus never referred to the Sabbath as a day of rest. What was it in the Jews’ understanding that Jesus was trying to correct? The concept of the Sabbath as rest is both defining and foundational. This paper will examine the reasons for, and the nature of, Jesus’ concept of the Sabbath as a day of work. It argues that Jesus’ understanding of the Sabbath was fundamentally messianic in nature, and explores what this may entail. Is there a danger that in the pursuit of the idea of the “Sabbath as rest” we can lose sight of Jesus’ own concept of the Sabbath?

1. Introduction

In recent decades, many facets of the biblical Sabbath have been seen in a more positive light by many within the broader Christian community.ⁱ Among Seventh-Day Adventists, the recent work by Sigve Tonstadⁱⁱ fills a crucial need, by pointing us incisively, I suggest, towards the development of a more complete theology of the Sabbath. While the work of previous Adventist scholars has rightly highlighted the importance of the Sabbath, I suggest that a theology of the Sabbath that places it in its full biblical context has not yet been fully articulated.ⁱⁱⁱ This paper seeks to contribute towards the conceptualisation of a New Testament and christological theology of the Sabbath, and suggests that this is a needed direction for future research.

The Sabbath healings of Jesus were key focal points of controversy, and the gospel writers undeniably emphasise Jesus’ Sabbath healings to the point that it seems quite reasonable to believe that it was Jesus’ own intention to highlight them.^{iv} Jesus’ Sabbath sayings appear mainly within His responses to the ire of the Jewish leaders, resulting from these healings.^v Therefore if we wish to understand Jesus’ own conceptualisation of the Sabbath, then it is these sayings that we must consider.^{vi}

It is difficult not to be struck by the audaciously radical nature^{vii} of these Sabbath statements. Becker^{viii} observes that they are, “repeatable, polemical statements, which he [Jesus] himself probably repeated, and which therefore were preserved in the memories of his hearers.” The radical nature of these sayings should be understood within the reality that first-century Jews defined community identity particularly around the practices of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance,^{xxxii} so that any perceived challenge to these prevailing notions would likely have been seen as a challenge to the community itself.^{xxxiii} Borg^{xxxiv} comments that, “[t]o the opponents in the sabbath controversies, in most cases named as Pharisees, this threatened to dissolve the sabbath institution as a distinctive mark of Israel, and thus threatened Israel’s existence.”^{xxxv}

1. Key Characteristics of Jesus’ Sabbath Sayings

I would now like to establish three key characteristics of Jesus’ Sabbath sayings. Firstly, I will examine their focus on the concept of work; secondly, their messianic nature; and thirdly, their fundamental and universal nature. For the sake of clarity, this section will deal firstly with the synoptic material,^{xxxvi} and then with the Johannine material.

1a) The Focus on Work in Jesus' Sayings

Jesus clearly highlights the notion of work in His defence of His own Sabbath works.^{xxxvii} It is also quite notable that Jesus never explicitly enunciates the concept of the Sabbath as “rest” in His extant sayings;^{xxxviii} rather, this is the understanding of His *opponents*. Their general view of the Sabbath is as a day for “not working.”^{xxxix} However, in apparent contrast, in His own defences of His Sabbath healings, Jesus consistently justifies the concept of *work*, and He does this specifically within the context of the Sabbath.^{xl}

More specifically in the sayings of Jesus, the Sabbath consistently refers to a *present* work.^{xli} Even in the only instance in which Christ appears to allude to creation, He affirms the centrality of the present reality to His understanding of the Sabbath. In this case, we see again the shift from the past to the present tense,

“27 Jesus said to them, “The Sabbath was made (γίνομαι) for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 “So the Son of Man is Lord (κύριός ἐστιν) even of the Sabbath.”” (Mark 2:27-28)

If anything, these elements are even more strongly present in the gospel of John^{xlii} than in the synoptics.^{xliii} In John 9, we have the healing of the man who was blind from birth. As a prelude to the healing narrative and its aftermath, the concept of the “works of God” (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ) that are to be “displayed” (φανερῶω) are introduced in v.3, and the imperative that, “We must work the works of him who sent me” (ἐμὲ δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ ἔργα τοῦ πέμψαντός με) is stated in v.4. It is evident that these healings are performed within the explicit context, specifically thus framed by Jesus, of the concept of work.

1b) The Messianic Nature of Jesus' Sabbath Sayings

The majority of Jesus' Sabbath sayings are inextricably interconnected, not only with Jesus' healing ministry, but also with His proclamation of His messiahship.^{xliv} The intimate connection between these three aspects may be readily demonstrated, in that Jesus' Sabbath work is able to be clearly, and almost symmetrically, aligned with His proclamation of His fulfilment of the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1–2^{xlv} Jesus' restatement of this prophecy seems to have been programmatic for His ministry, as Conzelmann identified.^{xlvi}

It is correspondingly entirely appropriate to view Jesus' polemical Sabbath statements as messianic statements. In fact, they should be understood, and indeed *were* understood by the Jews as direct messianic claims. Within the paradigm of Second Temple Judaism, messianic expectation was closely linked with eschatology. Therefore, in this regard, Allison^{xlvii} would seem to be correct in maintaining that, “Jesus' attitude toward the law should be correlated with his eschatological outlook.” Jesus Himself revealed His understanding of the intimate relationship between His healings and the appearance of the kingdom of God, in His declaration that,

“...if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (ἄρα ἔφθασεν ἐφ' ὑμᾶς ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ - Luke 11:20)^{xlviii}

The notion of the two ages, and the approaching change of the ages, is one of the “most persistent and dominant symbols in Jewish apocalyptic”.^{xlix} The idea is that the present age is coming to an end, and the new age of the reign of God will have “dramatic cosmic consequences” in which the created order is “transformed and renewed.”^l Furthermore, “[t]his change of the ages also has very strong ethical and spiritual consequences.”^{li} Within this context, the Sabbath itself was imbued with

eschatological meaning in early Judaism, and was considered as a “partial realization of the world to come.”^{lii} Allison rightly observes that, “[i]t might be natural, then, for Jesus, who saw his miracles as manifestations of the kingdom of God, to consider Sabbath healings as particularly appropriate symbols or realizations of that kingdom... salvation and deliverance from Satan are certainly, for Jesus, eschatological realities... and so they manifest the restoration of the creation.”^{liii}

It is for this reason that the gospels present us with Jesus’ concept of the Sabbath as being *centrally* “messianic” in nature. This has, for example, been suggested by Ensor^{liv} with regard to Jesus’ statements preceding the healing of the blind man in John 9:3b-4, in which, “Jesus may be making an implicit claim to messiahship... Jesus probably regarded himself as acting in an unprecedented way, as inaugurating a new era, and as being a ‘messianic’ figure.”^{lv} Jesus indeed identified Himself as the key agent in the inauguration of the reign of God, and indeed, as *the* key agent of the reign itself; and Jesus appears to have appropriated the concept of the Sabbath as a fundamental component of this identification.^{lv}

c) The Fundamental and Universal Nature of Jesus’ Sabbath Sayings

The second key feature of Jesus’ Sabbath sayings that I would like to highlight is their fundamental and universal nature. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of Jesus’ Sabbath polemic is that His focus is squarely on a direct engagement with Torah,^{lvi} and not principally with the scribal tradition. This was a point which was effectively and authoritatively argued by Joachim Jeremias.^{lvii}

This contrasts with one of the major views of Jesus’ Sabbath polemic: this is the view that He was merely quibbling over the scribal laws which defined permissible work on the Sabbath.^{lviii} In the final analysis, Jesus’ engagement with the oral tradition with regard to the Sabbath is only tangential and in passing, en route to His main purpose, which is an engagement with the fundamental meaning and purpose of the Sabbath itself. Jesus is not content to *merely* dispute the Pharisaic interpretations of the law, but rather, He goes well beyond this: He engages in a fundamental process of the reinterpretation of Scripture itself.^{lix}

As has been noted above, it is evident that Jesus’ Sabbath sayings created a tremendous impact on His hearers. This surely would not have been the case if Jesus had been merely engaging with the scribal traditions regarding the Sabbath; after all, debates at that level were an accepted part of the discourse of first century Judaism. Jesus’ statements engaged with the Sabbath at a level that resulted in the Jewish leaders seeking to *kill* Him; evidence enough that Jesus’ challenge to the prevailing concept of the Sabbath went far beyond a mere contribution to the prevailing scribal debates about proper Sabbath-keeping. This was an aspect that Andreason recognised, when he observed that, “Jesus is not responding to the criticism with rabbinic Sabbath theology; he is proposing a new understanding of the sabbath.”^{lx}

The status of the Sabbath laws during the time of Jesus must also be borne in mind. In his dissertation on this very question, Scott did not find that in the early first century there were *no* Sabbath traditions, but rather that they were in the process of being developed.^{lxi} As such, they were being actively debated during the time of Jesus, before their subsequent formalisation within the oral law.^{lxii}

The fact remains that the *focal point*^{lxiii} of the passages dealing with the Sabbath controversies centre on the authority of Jesus to bring about the reign of God, “through a demonstration of God’s redemptive activity... Essential to these activities was the claim that Jesus had a unique relationship with God, by which the Jews (correctly) understood Jesus as claiming equality with God. They could not accept such a messiah.”^{lxiv}

2. John 5:17 As A Specific Example

Tonstad^{lxv} notes that in all of the gospels, the healing ministry of Jesus on the Sabbath is “a major emphasis and a subject fraught with far-reaching consequences.” Furthermore, “[w]hile all the gospels tell this story to varying degrees, it is most fully developed in the Gospel of John. In this gospel the Sabbath healings become the backbone of the entire plot.”^{lxvi} Within the gospel of John, the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda illustrates the suggestions made in this paper perhaps most clearly. Particularly notable is Jesus’ opening and central statement, by which He defends His Sabbath healing,

“...My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”^{lxvii}

...ὁ πατήρ μου ἕως ἄρτι ἐργάζεται καὶ ἐγὼ ἐργάζομαι

This is, of all of Jesus’ statements on the Sabbath, one of the ones that carries perhaps most strikingly cosmic and universal implications. Jesus is seemingly engaging with the fundamental issues that involve the nature and meaning of the Sabbath itself. He is engaging with the Sabbath at a level that goes far beyond the issue of the traditions of the scribes.^{lxviii}

Jesus’ defence of His Sabbath healing in ch.5 clearly constitutes one of the strongest Messianic declarations to be found in the gospels.^{lxix} In connecting the Sabbath with eschatology, which Jesus does through His own messianic identity, Jesus is following in the direction of given by the Old Testament, in which the Sabbath has an eschatological significance.^{lxx}

Immediately after the healing in Jn 5, the principal concern of the Jews, which is mentioned twice, is that Jesus had told the man to take up his pallet and walk. They say to the man, who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible [οὐκ ἔξεστίν] for you to carry your pallet." John therefore makes it clear that Jesus was being persecuted because of the works that He did on the Sabbath. He writes that, “[f]or this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath.” (v.16)

However, what Jesus *said* about these works made it even worse. In responding to the Jews in v.17, Jesus uses the same word (ἐργάζομαι) as is used in the Septuagint in Exodus 20:9 (ἐργῶ). This would not have been missed by the Jews, who were clearly sensitive to this issue.^{lxxi} As far as Jesus is concerned, it would appear that the heart of this polemic dealt squarely with the understanding of the fourth commandment. It is hardly likely to be a coincidence that Jesus’ statement in 5:17 is similar to that found in John 9:4, where Jesus declares in relation of the healing of the blind man, ἡμας δεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι (“We must work.”)^{lxxii}

Although the focus in these narratives is on the work of the Son of God, the Son is working because He is participating in the work of the Father.^{lxxiii} It is notable also that both ἐργάζεται and ἐργάζομαι are singular, present indicative forms of the same verb, emphasizing the present aspect of the work being performed.

Jesus’ present and future works (vv.27-29) declare Him to be the Messiah,^{lxxiv} and His messiahship itself consists in the performance of these works. (v.30) The critical point is that the concept of the Sabbath is bound up in this paradigm, because more specifically, Jesus’ Sabbath works particularly declare His messiahship, and He *specifically* performs these works on the Sabbath *because* He is the Messiah.^{lxxv}

In his exegesis of this passage, Borgen observes that, “the healing of the paralytic points to the resurrection of the dead.”^{lxxvi} As an example of the work given to the Son by the Father, “this

particular manifestation of God's providence anticipates the eschatological resurrection."^{lxxvii} Borgen therefore suggests that this Sabbath work is intended to be seen "within the broader perspective of the cosmos and redemptive history."^{lxxviii} The direct implication of this is indeed the very argument of this paper; that John portrays Jesus as requiring the Sabbath to be understood from a Messianic perspective.^{lxxix} What then, does a messianic perspective of the Sabbath entail? What was Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath, given His messianic self-conception?

3. A Messianic Perspective on the Sabbath: Gospel Implications

What Jesus appears to have been doing was essentially redefining the Sabbath^{lxxx} in the context of His understanding of the reign of God.^{lxxxii} The evidence indicates that Jesus' principal understanding of the Sabbath was from a Messianic perspective. However, while Adventists in particular have seen a redemptive aspect to the Sabbath, it would be fair to say that the christological and soteriological connections have not necessarily been clearly made.

By seeing the Sabbath as Jesus saw it, from a Messianic perspective, we are able to see the Sabbath through new lenses. This "newness" lies in the sense that perhaps this is a feature of Jesus' teaching that has not received the focus it deserves. By seeing the Sabbath from a Messianic perspective, we are looking at the same Sabbath of creation, and the same Sabbath of Sinai; however, we acknowledge that the coming of the Messiah *changes things*. The coming of the Messiah does not change what the Sabbath is; but rather, it adds layers of meaning that must change the perspective and focus of the followers of Jesus with regard to the Sabbath.^{lxxxii}

A christological understanding of the Sabbath firstly puts the Messiah, Jesus Christ, at the very heart of the concept of the Sabbath. Secondly, and more specifically, the focus of such an understanding of the Sabbath is on the Jesus' own redemptive work. Thirdly, and even more specifically, such an understanding of the Sabbath focuses on Jesus' *present* redemptive work of freedom and liberation from sin and its curse.^{lxxxiii}

4. Seventh-Day Adventist Views: Towards a Christological Theology of the Sabbath

It is appropriate here to acknowledge Seventh-day Adventist attempts at engagement with a Christological understanding of the Sabbath. It is notable that this engagement has been present in Adventist writing in recent decades, although in an unfocused and tentative manner.

In 1978, Niels-Erik Andreasen's published his monograph, *Rest and Redemption*, through Andrews University. In this work, Andreasen insightfully devoted a chapter to "The Sabbath and the Gospel."^{lxxxiv} Ironically, in this work, having pointed out the Christ and gospel-centred role of the Sabbath in the understanding of Jesus, Andreasen finds cause to lament that, "it is only too well known that most Christians do not observe the sabbath for this reason."^{lxxxv}

In 1982, Dederen's paper in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* also had important signposts of the direction which a christological theology should embrace. In his paper, Dederen noted^{lxxxvi} that when rightly considered, "the eschatological implications of the seventh-day Sabbath assume tremendous actuality."^{lxxxvii}

In 1985, Richard Rice published *The Reign of God*,^{lxxxviii} which used this same title as the theme by which he introduced Christian theology from a Seventh-day Adventist perspective.^{lxxxix} In his work, Rice points out that "the sabbath *also* relates to the doctrine of salvation" and "commemorates God's saving activity."^{xc}

In 1991, Jacques Doukhan published a theological study in a unique book which brought together key interfaith perspectives on the Sabbath.^{xc1} He wrote that the Sabbath has an “eschatological interpretation.”^{xcii}

In 1998, Samuele Bacchiochi published *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, and in this book, he wrote a chapter entitled, “The Savior and the Sabbath.”^{xciii} In this chapter, he defines the question which this chapter attempts to address as being, “the relationship between the Messianic redemption foreshadowed by the Sabbath and Christ’s redemptive ministry” and he goes on to tellingly remark that, “[s]urprisingly, Sabbatarian literature largely ignores this important aspect of the redemptive meaning and function of the Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments. Its focus is primarily on the creational origin of the Sabbath and its continuity during the course of redemptive history.”^{xciv} Bacchiochi comments on the two Sabbath healings reported by John, that they, “substantiate the redemptive meaning of the Sabbath... – namely, a time to experience and share the blessings of salvation accomplished by Christ.”^{xcv} Bacchiochi states that the New Testament position is that, “the coming of Christ is seen as the actualization, the realization of the redemptive typology of the Sabbath.”^{xcvi}

It is relevant then, in these concluding remarks, to make some observations on Tonstad’s significant monograph, *The Lost Meaning of the Sabbath Day*. This book represents a significant step in helping to provide a broader framework for a theology of the Sabbath within the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Tonstad tellingly observes that the claim that, “the seventh day represents a treasure of lost meaning is substantiated by the biblical witness.”^{xcvii} In the final section of his book, which he entitles “God’s Faithfulness in Jesus,”^{xcviii} Tonstad states that, “[n]o matter how rich and rewarding in the Jewish perception, soundings in the “psalm for the Sabbath day” inevitably lead beyond the Jewish perspective,”^{xcix} and he confidently calls for us to, “understand, affirm, and proclaim the connection between the faithfulness of God and the life of Jesus.” It is time then for us to move beyond merely “the Jewish perspective” on the Sabbath, and to acknowledge that, in Tonstad’s words, “[t]he orientation of the Sabbath is forward-looking, expectant, and hope-filled.”^c

5. Conclusion

This paper seeks to understand the Sabbath as a dimension of the messianic reign of God.^{ci} Such a perspective is centrally messianic in nature, which instead of presenting Jesus as abrogating the Sabbath, presents Jesus as the interpretative messianic focus of the Sabbath. Rather than detracting from the Sabbath, a messianic perspective adds layers of meaning that enhance the beauty of what God had previously revealed through the Sabbath.

In other words the Christology of the New Testament must be seen as the focus for understanding and redefining the Old. It does this not in terms of ideas that never existed in the Old Testament, but rather in terms of ideas that were only seminal and sometimes even poorly understood in the Old Testament, but which the Messianic ministry of Jesus brings into the fullness of glory. As this true for so many other revelations in the Old Testament, so must it also be true for the Sabbath.^{cii}

Therefore this paper calls for those who affirm the validity of the Seventh-day Sabbath to develop a corresponding christological basis for its observance. As “Christians,” that is our calling. I suspect that this process will result not only in a greater appreciation of the beauty and the significance of God’s gift of the Sabbath, but also in a greater ability to articulate the meaning of the Sabbath in our contemporary world. I conclude with the words of John F. Baldwin, S.J., who wrote that, “to ground one’s doctrinal affirmations on the intentions of the historical Jesus of Nazareth is a risky business.”^{ciii} Indeed it is, but no other foundation will do.