

## The Sabbath Was Made for Man

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In “Something Greater Than the Temple” we investigated the incident of the plucking of the grain on the Sabbath (Mt. 12:1-8; Mk. 2:23-28; Lk. 6:15). We saw that Jesus’ four-fold justification of the action of his disciples drew first from the experience of David and the holy bread (1 Sam. 21:1-6). He then deduced from contemporary opinions which reasoned that because of the relative importance of the Temple, restricted activities on the Sabbath could be set aside to perform the Temple service. Of particular significance was our discovery of this same opinion in the *Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* on Exodus 31:13. As we shall see, in that same rabbinical passage we also find the parallel for Jesus’ final statement, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The joint appearance of these ideas both in the *Mechilta* and in the Gospels indicates the existence of an independent Jewish homily which focused on the purpose and role of the Sabbath.

Jesus’ statement that “something greater than the Temple is here” was not meant to point to himself, but to underscore his opinion of the intrinsic value of the human individual. If the needs of the Temple outweighed the importance of the Sabbath, so also did the basic needs of the human being — who was even greater than the Temple. Jesus embraced developing notions of first-century Jewish humanism, which placed value on fellow human beings precisely because humanity — uniquely among all creation — bears the image of God. Previously, we have noted that the first-century Jewish emphasis on the ethical requirements of Leviticus 19:18b, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” was founded on the coincidental occurrence in the latter part of the verse, “I am the Lord your God.” The Sages reasoned that this declaration (“I am the Lord”) was to remind the readers that they were to love their neighbor because their neighbor bore the image of God.

Jesus’ third reason in the defense of his disciples cites Hosea 6:6a: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” (Mt. 12:7). Often, Jesus’ partial citation of Old Testament verses is merely the rabbinical style of hinting at the full verse. However, on this occasion, I think Jesus quoted only the first portion of the verse because he wanted to give it emphasis. In *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 4, the editor quotes the full verse, but for his purposes he emphasizes the content of the second half of the verse.

Simeon the Righteous was among the last of the men of the Great Assembly. He used to say: On three pillars the world stands — on the Torah, on the Temple service, and on acts of loving-kindness [mercy]. On the Torah: how so? Lo, it says, “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and *the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*” (Hos 6:6). Hence we see that the burnt offering is the most beloved of sacrifices, for the burnt offering is entirely consumed by the flames... But the study of Torah is more beloved by God than burnt offerings... Hence, when a sage sits and expounds to the congregation, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had offered up fat and blood on the altar.

He passes over Hosea’s mention of “mercy and not sacrifice.” His purpose was to emphasize the importance of Torah study. Thus, he recites the second colon about “the knowledge of God,” which he identifies with the study of the Scripture.

Are the differing scriptural emphases given by the editor of *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and Jesus a haphazard coincidence, or do they indicate something about their respective priorities? I personally think that the varying accentuation is no accident. I hope at a later point to give more full attention to what may be considered Jesus’ three pillars (or principles) of spirituality that are outlined in Matthew 6:1-18. At this juncture it is sufficient to state what they are: acts of loving-kindness (Mt. 6:1-4), prayer (Mt. 6:5-6), and repentance/fasting (Mt. 6:16-18).

The reader should take note that Simeon’s ordering of the three pillars assumes a prioritization. That is reinforced by the statement, “But the study of Torah is more beloved by God than burnt offerings [i. e., Temple service].” Should we assume that Jesus’ ordering of his own spiritual pillars in Matthew 6 likewise indicates a prioritization? If so, then acts of loving-kindness, or responsibility to one’s neighbor, was of the utmost importance to Jesus (cf. Lk. 10:25-28). The relative significance of the needs of the human individual also lies at the heart of Jesus’ justification of his disciples’ actions.

One final note before we continue to Jesus’ closing argument. On another occasion, a scribe who came to Jesus linked the command to “love one’s neighbor” and Hosea 6:6: “To love one’s neighbor as oneself — this is much more important than all *whole burnt offerings and sacrifices*” (Mk. 12:33). This independent combination of the two biblical verses (Lev. 19:18 and Hos. 6:6) strengthens our contention that Jesus cites the Hebrew prophet to define his opinion concerning the importance with which God views human need. By the way, Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries’ employed Hosea 6:6 with a decidedly different understanding than that of later Christian writers (cf. Hebrews 10). These writers used the verse merely to support their claim that the Temple was obsolete. No such idea can be heard on the lips of Jesus, whose final meal was an act of full participation in the Temple service.

Jesus concludes his argument with a summation of the relationship between the Sabbath and humanity. The form of the saying is most clearly preserved in Mark 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the son of man is lord even of the Sabbath."

The common Christian interpretation which understands Jesus to claim to be "the Lord of the Sabbath" makes little sense in the context. It is inconsistent with the line of reasoning outlined in Jesus' previous three points of justification. Moreover, Jesus' relationship to the Sabbath has no direct bearing on the defense of his disciples' actions. It is not Jesus who husked the grains, but his disciples. Instead, the enigmatic title — son of man — on this occasion possesses the simple Hebraic sense, "human being," and refers to his disciples as representatives of humanity.

Scholarship has widely recognized the parallels between Jesus' statement in Mark 2:27 and a nearly identical statement in the Mechilta on Exodus 31:14.

There are Sabbaths on which you must rest and there are Sabbaths on which you should not rest. R. Simon b. Menasia says: Behold it says: "And you shall keep the Sabbath; it is holy [i. e., dedicated] *for you*" (Exod. 31:14). This means:

*The Sabbath is given to you but you are not given to the Sabbath.*

However, few scholars have noted that this saying appears together with the discussion about the Temple service a few lines earlier. As we stated, the concurrence of these two notions in the Mechilta and the Gospels underscores the probability that they existed together independent of Jesus and the Jewish midrash. They belong to an ancient Jewish homily which addressed the role of the Sabbath in the life of the people of Israel. It seems that this homily was drawn upon by both Jesus and the compiler of the Mechilta to convey their respective messages.

Our study has brought attention to the integration of Jesus' argument with contemporary Jewish notions. He was no rogue rejecting the Jewish opinion regarding the sanctity of the Sabbath. Instead, he tried to balance the importance of God's instruction with the extenuating demands of the human setting. His four arguments indicate a sophisticated line of reasoning which was rooted in contemporary Jewish interpretation of Scripture and developing notions of Jewish humanism. This latter sphere tried to take into account the frailty of the human condition and interpreted the requirements of God's commands such that they did not overly burden the individual. As Jesus put it: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me... For my yoke [i. e., my teaching] is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:29-30). According to contemporary Jewish opinion, the sanctity of the Sabbath was superseded by the sanctity of human life. Consequently, Jesus and the Sages of Israel agreed: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

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