

“To Save a Life”: The Historicity of the Sabbath Healing Controversies

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Abstract

In his fourth volume of *A Marginal Jew*, John P. Meier argues against the historicity of the Gospels' Sabbath healing controversies. Examining Jewish sources, he concludes that healing was not prohibited until the late second or early third century C.E. and that Jesus's actions could not be construed as work. This article argues that it is possible to locate debates about healing on the Sabbath to the first century C.E. Rabbinic material is often traceable back to earlier centuries, and the Gospels themselves could be considered as offering historical data. Further, the Gospel writers had no reason to manufacture such narratives, as they do not address controversies in the early Christian church. Finally, it is shown that Jesus's healings could have been viewed as work if he were seen as a professional healer. The controversies thus revolve around Jesus's identity. It is concluded that historically and logically, Jesus's Sabbath healings could have produced controversy.

Introduction

Along with circumcision and the avoidance of impure food, few practices characterized Jewish faith in the Second Temple period like resting on the Sabbath. As a practicing Jew, Jesus also kept Sabbath, yet not without controversy. The Gospels tell of clashes with religious leaders over proper Sabbath-keeping. Aside from the issue of picking grain (Mark 2:23–27 *par*), these controversies involved the permissibility of healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6 *par*; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–15; 9:1–16). In these narratives, religious leaders believed it to be unlawful to perform such healings on Sabbath. Jesus disagreed. The

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

controversies serve to highlight Jesus's mercy toward the sick and disabled.

Historical Jesus scholars are relatively unanimous in seeing Jesus as a practicing Jew who engaged in discourse regarding the way in which one should live according to the will of God. In a forceful article on the Sabbath controversies, Donald A. Hagner makes this very point, noting "it is a priori extremely unlikely that Jesus could come with his revolutionary message about the dawning of the kingdom of God and never speak of his relation to something as common as the question of Sabbath observance."¹ Those who have written against the historicity of these narratives typically discuss perceived editorialization on the part of the Gospel writers, or the apparently minor extent of Jesus's infraction.² In his article, Hagner argues for the historicity of the Sabbath healing controversies as meeting all the typical criteria used in historical Jesus research. Shortly before his article went to press, the fourth volume in John P. Meier's magisterial work *A Marginal Jew* was published. In his new volume Meier offered the most persuasive argument to date against the historicity of the Sabbath healing controversies.³ Hagner includes a brief response to Meier's new volume at the end of his article, but was unable to answer him fully due to the timing of publication.⁴

This present article builds upon Hagner's work by responding to the arguments presented by Meier. Meier's methodology of weighing historical criteria has been criticized by recent studies on memory and oral tradition.⁵ Others have argued that the Gospels show signs of being

¹ Donald A. Hagner, "Jesus and the Synoptic Sabbath Controversies," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 2 (2009): 232.

² Hagner primarily argues against the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar as published in R. W. Funk and R. W. Hoover, eds., *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1993), 50, 184; Robert W. Funk and The Jesus Seminar, eds., *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 69.

³ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 4: Law and Love*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). For his discussion on the Sabbath see pp. 235–341.

⁴ Hagner, "Sabbath Controversies," 247–48.

⁵ Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 64–91; Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 1–10; Alan Kirk, *Memory and the Jesus Tradition*, *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries 2* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 179–232; Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 81.

comparable to other ancient histories and thus are more trustworthy than Meier suggests.⁶ Yet neither approach defeats Meier's contention regarding the Sabbath healing controversies. Meier presents two major challenges: one historical and the other logical. For the historical argument, Meier contends there is no evidence that healing on the Sabbath was unlawful in the first century C.E. Instead, he suggests these controversies were invented by early Christians as a way to respond to debates within Christian communities. Sections 1 and 2 of this article will show that debates about healing on Sabbath make more sense within a first-century Jewish context than within a Christian one. Regarding the logical argument, Meier suggests the actions involved in Jesus's healing—speaking a few words—could never have been construed as labor. Section 3 will explain how this argument misidentifies the nature of unlawful Sabbath labor as defined in Second Temple Judaism.

I. Rabbinic Views on Sabbath Healing

Fundamentally, the Sabbath meant work stoppage. Exodus 20:9–10 and Deuteronomy 5:13–14 state that six days were for labor and the seventh day for rest. The Sabbath was therefore a happy day in which Jews could rest from their “toilsome life.”⁷ This avoidance of work guided every other aspect of Sabbath observance in the Second Temple period. The rabbis famously stipulated thirty-nine activities which were forbidden on Sabbath, encompassing agriculture, food preparation, clothing manufacture and repair, hunting, writing, and building.⁸ Especially pious Jews took precaution to ensure that not even the slightest hint of work would be performed on Sabbath.⁹ Because fire was

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 20–21; Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 38–73.

⁷ Aristobulus, apud: Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 13.12.9; cf. Philo, *Mos.* 2.211. Hagner, “Sabbath Controversies,” 234, suggests that “All would have agreed that the Sabbath was a gift of God to Israel, and that it was made for human welfare.”

⁸ *m. Shabb.* 7:2. Yong-Eui Yang, tracing the various Sabbath prohibition lists from the Second Temple period, points out that the number of Sabbath regulations appears to grow over time (*Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, JSNT Supplement Series 139 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997], 66n55).

⁹ CD 10.15–16 commanded that work should stop once the sun reached a distance from the horizon equal to its own diameter (approximately five minutes before sunset), lest laborious activity carry over into Sabbath. The rabbis did not allow even a needle to be carried on the Sabbath, likely because it was a tool of labor (*m. Shabb.* 1.3).

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

used in so many work-related activities, sources often mention the lighting of fires as a forbidden activity, reflecting Exodus 35:3.¹⁰ Outsiders, commenting on the perceived laziness of the Jews, attest to the fact that rest was essential to Sabbath observance.¹¹ Work stoppage was therefore at the core of Sabbath keeping.

Could goodwill be extended to others on Sabbath? Sources disagree on what labor could be carried out on behalf of someone else. After Judas Maccabeus defeated Nicanor, he is said to have given out spoils “to those who had been tortured and to the widows and orphans” only after the Sabbath had ended.¹² Shammai taught that charity and prayers for the poor and sick were not appropriate on Sabbath, but Hillel disagreed.¹³ Similar scruples pertained to healing. The rabbis generally forbade healing on the Sabbath as an act of labor, albeit with exceptions. Medicine could be taken, but only if it were in a form that would be regularly used, such as food or oil.¹⁴ In other words, the use of medicine as only medicine was prohibited—the healing must be a side-effect. Likewise, injuries could not be treated unless it be in a manner typical of everyday washing: “Nor should one straighten [the limb] of a child, nor restore a broken [limb]. He whose hand or foot was dislocated: one must not plunge them into cold [water], but he [may] wash in his [normal] way and if he is healed, he is healed.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the rabbis allowed for a sick man to be transported out of a house on a stretcher, but there is

¹⁰ *m. Shabb.* 7.2. Philo, *Mos.* 2.219–20, states that fire was a tool for all other work, and thus is especially forbidden. For examples of Gentiles who were also aware of the Jew’s hesitance to build fires on Sabbath, see Meleager, *Anthologia Graeca*, 5.160; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 29.3.

¹¹ Tacitus, *History*, 5.4; Seneca, *De Superstitione*, apud: Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei*, 6.11; Juvenal, *Saturae*, 14.96–106.

¹² 2 Macc 8.26–8.

¹³ *t. Shabb.* 16.22. Philo, *Legat.* 158, assumes Jews would not accept charity on Sabbath. *m. Shabb.* 1.1 allows for charity as long as the carrying of the gift is shared between the giver and the receiver, in order to prevent any one person from transferring the gift between domains (cf. Ex 16.29; 36.6; *m. Shabb.* 7.2).

¹⁴ *m. Shabb.* 14:3–4.

¹⁵ *m. Shabb.* 22:6. Translation taken from David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament, Vol 2a, Feasts and Sabbaths: Passover and Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 67. He sees the specific mention of the straightening of a child’s limb as meaning no one, not even children, could receive explicit medical treatment that was not life-saving. Nina L. Collins disagrees, arguing that *m. Shabb.* 22:6 gives permission for adults to be medically treated on Sabbath (*Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate: Healing on the Sabbath in the 1st and 2nd Century CE*, Library of New Testament Studies 474 [New York: T&T Clark, 2014], 6, 393, 409).

no indication this would be done for the purpose of healing.¹⁶ In sum, the rabbis allowed healing on the Sabbath when it was not the primary intention of an action.¹⁷ Conversely, intentional acts of healing were prohibited.

The rabbis did agree that it was appropriate to save life on the Sabbath. As it says in the Mishnah, “Doubt [about] lives overrides the Sabbath.”¹⁸ If someone were at risk of losing their life, it was always lawful to help them, at least in Mishnaic Judaism. This could mean preventing a fire from spreading, saving someone from drowning, or assisting in childbirth.¹⁹ Tertullian seems to be well-acquainted with this provision for life-saving when he summarizes the Sabbath commandment: “Remember the day of the sabbaths, to sanctify it: do no servile work on it, except what pertains to life.”²⁰ It should be noted that Jesus’s Sabbath healings were done for patently non-life-threatening maladies. The disabilities had been endured for 18 years (Luke 13:11), 38 years (John 5:5), or since birth (John 9:1). The illnesses themselves were often such that waiting one day would not have caused extreme distress

¹⁶ *m. Shabb.* 10:5b.

¹⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.255, summarizes by stating the forbidden act was one that “involves some special action above and beyond the ordinary actions that one regularly and licitly performs on the sabbath.”

¹⁸ *m. Yom.* 8:6; cf. *t. Shabb.* 15:11–17. For discussions on whether it was acceptable to save the lives of animals on Sabbath, see Robert J. Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 28 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 126–27; Phillip Sigal, *The Halakhah of Jesus of Nazareth According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 138; Daniel J. Harrington, “Sabbath Tensions: Matthew 12:1–14 and Other New Testament Texts,” in *The Sabbath in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, Daniel J. Harrington, and William H. Shea (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1991), 53; Thomas Kazen, *Scripture, Interpretation, or Authority? Motives and Arguments in Jesus’ Halakic Conflicts*, WUNT 320 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 92–95; Simon J. Joseph, *Jesus, the Essenes, and Christian Origins: New Light on Ancient Texts and Communities* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 119–20.

¹⁹ Fire-prevention: *m. Shabb.* 16.7. Rescuing from water: CD 11.16, although with stipulations that tools like ladders or rope could not be used because they are associated with labor. 4Q265 fr. 7 1.5–8 suggests using one’s cloak as an acceptable means of pulling someone out of the water. Here Sigal, *Halakhah of Jesus*, 140, misses the mark by assuming that life-saving was prohibited, when the focus is merely on the use of tools. Because the Dead Sea Community tended to be stricter than the rabbis represented in the Mishnah, it seems a safe assumption that the rabbis would have supported rescuing someone from water on the Sabbath. Assisting in childbirth: *m. Shabb.* 18.3–19.1, although generally this assistance did not apply to animals giving birth.

²⁰ Tertullian, *Against the Jews*, 4.1.

(Mark 3:1–6 *par*; Luke 14:1–6). The Mishnah expected parents to wait to circumcise their son until after the Sabbath, and the same could be expected for those who would be healed by Jesus.²¹ If the rules found in the Mishnah regarding Sabbath were taught and enforced in Jesus's day, it would come as no surprise that these healings were challenged.

Meier raises the question of whether the prohibition against Sabbath healing can be dated to the time of Jesus. He points out that healing does not appear in the biblical list of prohibited Sabbath offences: "Most of the prohibitions [in the Hebrew Bible]—buying and selling, lighting a fire, cooking, and indeed most kinds of agricultural work—are completely irrelevant to the Gospel stories recounting disputes about sabbath observance."²² Based on the extra-biblical lists of Sabbath laws that are reliably dated before the time of Jesus, namely those in CD 10–11 and *Jubilees* 2 and 50, "Jesus emerges absolutely blameless."²³ He correctly observes that the first specific mention of the prohibition of healing on the Sabbath outside of the Gospels comes from the Mishnah. Thus, "the total silence in such a wide range of witnesses of different times and tendencies—the Jewish Scriptures, the deuterocanonical books, *Jubilees*, the *Damascus Document*, the Cave 4 fragments from Qumran, Philo, and Josephus—places the burden of proof on anyone who would want to claim that, prior to A.D. 70, any significant segment of Jewish opinion branded an act of healing a breach of sabbath."²⁴ Rabbinic material is the only evidence outside of the Gospels for prohibitions against Sabbath healing.

While the Mishnah was likely compiled around C.E. 200, some of the material it contains is older. According to Meier, this is not the case for the Sabbath healing prohibitions. He views the sometimes-contradictory Sabbath laws in the Mishnah as evidence that Sabbath halakha was not settled as late as the early third century C.E. He sees these laws having "a certain air of tentativeness," with many qualifications and disputes.²⁵ He points to an allowance in the Tosefta for healing amulets to be worn, which would make no sense "if healing *per se* were an activity always,

²¹ *m. Shabb.* 19:5. See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 3A (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 1.528. Cf. Douglas J. Moo, "Jesus and the Authority of the Mosaic Law," *JSNT* 6, no. 20 (1984): 16. *Jubilees* 15.25 allows for circumcision on all days, including the Sabbath.

²² Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.240.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.243.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.255.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.250.

everywhere, and in all its forms forbidden on the sabbath.”²⁶ Meier identifies in the Mishnah a newly-introduced field of inquiry into the legality of Sabbath healing. For him, the fact that the Gospels portray the matter as settled, at least in the minds of the religious elites, represents an anachronism.

If Jesus lived in the late second or early third century, there would be no difficulty in accepting the historicity of the disputes between Jesus and the religious leaders regarding healing on the Sabbath. The situation is complicated by the fact that the Gospels are the earliest reference to controversy over this particular matter of Sabbath praxis. How one views these episodes in the Gospels will be determined in part by how one reconstructs the *Sitz im Leben* of first-century C.E. Palestine.

II. Reconstructing First-Century Praxis

A. Rabbinic traditions from the first century C.E.

As discussed above, Meier claims the Mishnah’s discussions about healing on the Sabbath cannot be traced back to the first century C.E., based on the observation that opinions on the subject were apparently still in flux at the start of the third century. David Instone-Brewer disagrees, and includes several of the regulations against healing on Sabbath in his *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament*. In this ongoing series, he takes an optimistic view of the accuracy with which previous traditions had been handed down. “The whole ethos of rabbinic literature suggests that it was praiseworthy to record past rabbis accurately, even when they disagreed with the view of the consensus or the view of the person who recorded the saying.”²⁷ Biographical data is often embellished in rabbinic sources, and citations purportedly by the earliest rabbis were sometimes created when biblical justification for a given ruling was lacking.²⁸ When these trends are accounted for, attributions attached to sayings “have been found to be generally accurate,” allowing him to reach conclusions about the date of many Mishnaic traditions based on the known history of the rabbi associated with a given saying.²⁹

For those sayings with no attribution, the method of logical precedence can assist in dating. If saying B, attributed to a rabbi from the

²⁶ Ibid., 4.251, citing *t. Shabb.* 4:10.

²⁷ Instone-Brewer, *TRENT*, 1.28; cf. *m. Avot.* 2:9.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.31.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.30.

mid-second century, logically builds off of saying A, then saying A must be earlier than saying B.³⁰ External attestation—from sources like the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, Philo, or even the New Testament—can also provide a basis for dating rabbinic material.³¹ Using these methodologies, Instone-Brewer has attempted to identify those passages in the Mishnah that reasonably could have come from the first century C.E.

Applying his method to the rulings about healing on the Sabbath, Instone-Brewer first views the prohibition list in *m. Shabb. 7:2* as being compiled before the first century C.E. Rulings ascribed to first century rabbis, such as *m. Shabb. 22:3*, seem already to assume the existence of those thirty-nine Sabbath prohibitions. He suggests that healing only became a point of contention during the time of Jesus, after the list had already been established.³² He considers the specific rulings against Sabbath healing in *m. Shabbat 14:3–4* and *22:6* to come from before the fall of Jerusalem.³³ However, the basis upon which he makes these decisions are tenuous. In the above two examples, decisions about dating come not from attestation, but from Gospel evidence. Instone-Brewer assumes the historicity of the Gospel Sabbath controversies, which in turn allows him to determine the date of the rabbinic saying. This methodology would preclude these sayings from being used to prove the historicity of the Gospels, because this would lead to circular reasoning. While the traditions regarding the saving of life on the Sabbath are based on named attribution, explicit prohibitions from healing on the Sabbath are not.³⁴

Rabbinic attestation cannot prove the prohibitions against Sabbath healing existed in the first century, but logical precedence may be useful. Thomas Kazen points out that healing would not necessarily have appeared on the list of *m. Shabb. 7:2*, given it is outside of regular household duties.³⁵ Lutz Doering is perhaps more persuasive, however, in suggesting that the allowance for saving a life on the Sabbath and later assurances of this allowance would not have been necessary if it were

³⁰ Ibid., 1.33–34.

³¹ Ibid., 1.34–35.

³² Ibid., 2a.34–36, 67.

³³ Ibid., 2a.45, 68

³⁴ *m. Yom. 8:6–7*; *t. Shabb. 15:16*; *16:22a*. For discussion see Instone-Brewer, *TRENT*, 2a.60–61, 71, 75.

³⁵ Kazen, *Scripture*, 85–86.

thought that healing on Sabbath was acceptable.³⁶ The discussion in the Mishnah seems to be looking for exceptions to an assumed prohibition, rather than to an assumed allowance. The specific stipulations found in the later teaching of the rabbis thus represent the refining of principles already found within the Pharisaic tradition of Jesus's day ("daß sabbatliches Heilen [auch] schon von den Pharisäern verboten wurde").³⁷ This argumentation provides reason to doubt Meier's claim that all rabbinic evidence for Sabbath healing prohibition post-dates Jesus.

B. The historical viability of the Gospels

Based on the typical criteria of historicity within the field of historical Jesus studies, the Sabbath healing controversies are quite solid. Meier himself admits multiple sources support the idea that Jesus faced criticism over healing on the Sabbath, with material from Mark, L, John, and possibly Q.³⁸ Furthermore, these narratives meet the criterion of discontinuity from Judaism, given they highlight one way in which Jesus broke from the dominant religious teachings on the subject.³⁹ Despite this appearance of historicity, Meier states, "sometimes a brief inspection employing the criterion of multiple attestation can be deceiving."⁴⁰ For him, the typical criteria of historicity are overturned by the silence of the extra-biblical sources regarding Sabbath healing. While admitting this is an argument from silence, in this case he takes the silence as a

³⁶ Lutz Doering, "Sabbath Laws in the New Testament Gospels," in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et al., Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 228–29. Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath*, 199, agrees, stating "The prohibition of healing, however, is assumed rather than argued in the various rabbinic writings."

³⁷ Lutz Doering, *Schabbat: Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 449–50; cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), 18.

³⁸ Mark 3:1–6 *par*; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–15; 9:1–16. With regard to Matt 12:11 = Luke 14:5, Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 260 does not consider this Q, but rather an Aramaic saying heard separately by Matthew and Luke. In this Meier agrees with the findings of James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis Including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN/Leuven: Fortress Press/Peeters, 2000), 426–27. They conclude this material was not part of Q.

³⁹ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.235.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.253.

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

“metaphorical shout.”⁴¹ He believes the sayings of Jesus regarding the Sabbath are historical, because they tend to relate to more than just healing. “The critical difference is that the dispute narratives make sense only if Jews in general at the time of Jesus held acts of healing on the sabbath to be violations of the sabbath.”⁴² For Meier, the Gospels accurately preserve Jesus’s sayings about the Sabbath, but have manufactured the context in which those sayings are recorded.

As seen in the discussion of Instone-Brewer’s methodology, it is only true that no sources from the first century C.E. speak of Sabbath healing if the Gospels are discounted. This speaks to a wider issue regarding the way in which the Gospels are to be used in historical reconstruction. Benjamin I. Simpson points out that Meier exhibits “the old form-critical assumption that the Gospels present the theology of the early church as opposed to accurately presenting the historical Jesus.”⁴³ Others have questioned whether this assumption is warranted. In his work *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham argues that Gospel material was informed by the testimony of those who were witnesses to Jesus’s life. The Gospels should not be overlooked as mere theological treatise or sectarian propaganda. The intention of the authors was to present what had actually happened. “From a historiographic perspective, radical suspicion of testimony is a kind of epistemological suicide. It is no more practicable in history than it is in ordinary life.”⁴⁴ Papias, one of the earliest commentators on the making of the Gospels, is solely interested in their accuracy vis-à-vis their connection to an eyewitness.⁴⁵ Based on Bauckham’s work, the Gospel writers were more interested in recounting actual history than is assumed by Meier’s approach.⁴⁶

Setting aside Bauckham’s challenge to the suspicion with which the Gospels have been treated, there are nonetheless two problems with Meier’s conclusion from a historical perspective. First, it assumes in the latter half of the first century that Christians chose to invent a

⁴¹ Ibid., 4.255.

⁴² Ibid., 4.267; cf. 4.262.

⁴³ Benjamin I. Simpson, *Recent Research on the Historical Jesus*, Recent Research in Biblical Studies 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 51.

⁴⁴ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 526; cf. Simpson, *Research*, 88, who reviews theories of orality before concluding that eyewitnesses likely helped control the traditions being spread during the first century C.E.

⁴⁵ Papias, apud: Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3–4. Cf. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 314.

⁴⁶ See conclusions in Keener, *Christobiography*, 497–98.

controversy about healing on the Sabbath. While admitting we know very little about common Jewish Christians living at that time, he asserts “these Christian Jews seek to justify their less-than-stringent approach to sabbath observance by recounting how Jesus had shown that their archetypal opponents, the Pharisees, were both ignorant of Scripture and unreasonably harsh in their treatment of innocent activity on the sabbath.”⁴⁷ If this were the case, one would not expect disparate sources (Mark, John, L) to have all independently manufactured similar healing stories to make their point. It would be especially impressive that such a theological insertion could make it into small details in unrelated pericopes, as is the case with Jews waiting until after sunset to seek Jesus for healing (Mark 1.32=Luke 4.40). The historicity of these narratives offers a more probable explanation for their origin. It should not be forgotten that “the early church’s theology originated from Jesus’s own reflections.”⁴⁸ If Christian Jews had opinions about proper Sabbath praxis, it is not unreasonable to assume those opinions were influenced by Jesus’s life and teachings.

Further, if there is little evidence for healing on the Sabbath being prohibited in first-century Judaism, there is even less evidence for controversies about Sabbath praxis among first-century Christians. While the notion of observing certain days as sacred was occasionally discussed (Rom 14:5; Gal 4:10; Col 2:16), there is no indication that healing on the Sabbath was a point of contention within early Christian communities. The question seems to have been *whether* certain festival days were to be celebrated, but not *how* they should be celebrated. Yet the Gospels’ Sabbath controversies revolve around the manner in which Sabbath should be observed. There is no evidence that the early Christians were asking questions about proper Sabbath observance. As Tom Holmén puts it, “There is no apparent reason why the early Church would have created these kinds of stories.”⁴⁹ Hagner agrees, arguing it would be unlikely for a story to be created where there was no need within the church community.⁵⁰ With no external support for healing controversies within either Jewish or Christian communities, we are left with only the

⁴⁷ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.279.

⁴⁸ Simpson, *Research*, 114.

⁴⁹ Tom Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking*, Biblical Interpretation Series 55 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 99. See his discussion on the unlikelihood of Sabbath disputes being a part of the *Sitz im Leben* of the early Christian community (91–100).

⁵⁰ Hagner, “Sabbath Controversies,” 228.

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

Gospels themselves. The “metaphorical shout” of silence is just as loud from Christian sources as from Jewish ones.

The second problematic assumption that is entailed in Meier’s position is in the separation of Sabbath teachings from Sabbath narratives. As mentioned above, Meier views Jesus’s teachings in the Sabbath controversy narratives to be historical, given that they tend to explain broad principles about Sabbath praxis. He argues these sayings would make sense in a variety of contexts, but the narratives themselves “make sense only if Jews in general at the time of Jesus held acts of healing on the sabbath to be violations of the sabbath.”⁵¹ For example, he views the saying about saving an animal from a pit (Matt 12:11; Luke 14:5) as reacting against the stricter precepts of the Essenes and possibly the Pharisees. “None of these sayings states explicitly that some Jews hold healing to be a breach of the sabbath.”⁵² However, it is not so easy to divorce the saying from the narrative. Regarding the above example, one might ask what is the purpose of the saying if not to prove that healing is acceptable on the Sabbath. The example of saving an animal is used to illustrate the greater example of saving human life.⁵³ Even the Damascus Document, with its stringent regulations, allowed for life to be saved on the Sabbath, albeit without tools.⁵⁴ So against whom is Jesus arguing? Discussing Luke 13:15 and 14:5, Holmén states, “If healing is not work, we do not know why Jesus would compare it to pulling an ox, child and/or a sheep out from a well or a pit.”⁵⁵ The sayings, if authentic, indicate that Jesus clashed with his interlocutors regarding what could be done on the Sabbath. There must have been some disagreement between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day about how one kept the Sabbath. But if the Sabbath healing controversies are deemed

⁵¹ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.267. It should be noted that it is not necessary for “Jews in general” to have held such beliefs, but only those Jews considered to have power in the society. Cf. Luke 13:10–14 for an example of disagreement between the crowd and the synagogue ruler. For the plausibility of such a debate occurring in a synagogue, see Jordan J. Ryan, “Jesus and Synagogue Disputes: Recovering the Institutional Context of Luke 13:10–17,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (2017): 56–58.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.262.

⁵³ This “lesser to greater” (*kal vahomer*) argument was often used within rabbinic debates. The logic here is that if it is acceptable to help an animal on the Sabbath, then it is even more acceptable to assist a person. See recent discussion in David A. Smith, “Lord of the Sabbath Controversies: Luke’s Development of a Theological Vision,” *Revue biblique* 129, no. 1 (2022): 62–63.

⁵⁴ CD 11.6. See note 17 above.

⁵⁵ Holmén, *Jesus and Jewish Covenant Thinking*, 104.

unhistorical, we are left to wonder whether Jesus ever did anything contrary to the Sabbath regulations of his day.

This section has attempted to show that doubting the historicity of the Sabbath healing controversies brings more questions than answers. How one views the dating of the rabbinic material is heavily influenced by how one views the Gospels. There seems to be little reason for the early church to have manufactured these narratives, and Jesus's sayings about the Sabbath seem to presuppose them. There remains the question of why healing may have been deemed unlawful on the Sabbath.

III. Jesus the Professional Healer?

While Meier's historical argument is worthy of consideration, his logical argument is perhaps his strongest. In the story of the healing of the man with a crippled hand, Jesus first commands the man to stand. He then performs the miracle by speaking a mere three (Mark 3:5) or four (Matt 12:13; Luke 6:10) words. "Why should Jesus' two short commands, which do not urge any action that would be illicit on the sabbath, constitute such a violation?"⁵⁶ Even if it were granted that certain acts of healing were deemed unlawful to perform on the Sabbath in the first century C.E., it seems difficult to explain why a few spoken words would fall under the umbrella of unlawful actions.

Part of the difficulty comes from a misunderstanding regarding the way in which Sabbath rest was viewed in the Second Temple period. Rather than merely disallowing physical exertion, the emphasis was on resting from one's regular means of making a living. No effort was to be made for gaining money on the Sabbath, at least according to religious leaders.⁵⁷ Summarizing early rabbinic interpretations on Sabbath-keeping, Jacob Neusner states, "on the Sabbath it is prohibited deliberately to carry out in a normal way a completed act of constructive labor, one that produces enduring results, one that carries out one's entire

⁵⁶ Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 4.254.

⁵⁷ Philo, *Opif.* 128; Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 1.413–16. For examples of Jews who did engage in financial enterprises on Sabbath, see Doering, *Schabbat*, 387–97. Andrea J. Mayer-Haas suggests that the rabbinic view of Sabbath-keeping is overly optimistic, and that the common Jew may have compromised on the prohibitions if it was necessary for survival ("*Geschenk aus Gottes Schatzkammer*" (*bSchab 10b*): *Jesus und der Sabbat im Spiegel der neutestamentlichen Schriften*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 43 [Münster: Aschendorff, 2003], 71).

intention.”⁵⁸ Presumably one could work up a sweat doing an activity that was either not one’s typical mode of labor or which did not produce a beneficial result. This prohibition meant that commercial endeavors could not even be discussed on the Sabbath, as this would violate the spirit of the day.⁵⁹

Jews avoided going to the courts on Sabbath. Again, the matter of appearing before a judge and speaking may not have the appearance of labor. Yet it would be done for the purpose of enrichment or self-preservation. For this reason, Augustus gave Jews an exemption from appearing in court on Friday evening or Sabbath.⁶⁰ Commercial and juridical labor, as much as physical labor, was prohibited because they broke the Second Temple understanding of proper Sabbath-keeping: the avoidance of the typical means by which a person sustained their life. This is a crucial point in the question of the historicity of the Sabbath healing controversies. How one defines the fundamental task of Sabbath-keeping will either assist or hinder one’s understanding of these narratives.

There were almost certainly people in Jesus’s day who made their living as healers and exorcists. Rural settings such as those portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels would have been especially likely to need the services of folk healers—people who healed using folk remedies, prayer, or magic.⁶¹ Bernd Kollman argues that the Second Temple period saw an incorporation of “white magic” into Jewish culture. This supernatural

⁵⁸ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began: A Survey of Belief and Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 76; cf. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Jubilees* 50.8; CD 10.19. These two documents tend to exhibit stricter guidelines than was likely the belief for most Jews living in the Second Temple period, but in this instance, they may be more mainstream. *m. Shabb.* 23.1 states that something can be borrowed from a friend on the Sabbath as long as the giving could not be construed as a commercial loan. That the rabbis did not allow for a commercial loan to be instituted on the Sabbath suggests that they would not have allowed any “business talk.”

⁶⁰ Josephus, *A.J.* 16.163; cf. Horace, *Sermones*, 1.9.68–70 = *Satyrarum libri*, 1.9.69, whose humorous portrayal turns on the notion that a Jew would not testify on the Sabbath.

⁶¹ Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles*, JSNT Supplement Series 231 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 357. The line between magic and miracle is famously difficult to define in the study of ancient cultures, and literature on the subject is vast and growing. For a helpful bibliography on magic and healers in the first century, see Andrew J. Kelley, *Thaumaturgic Prowess: Autonomous and Dependent Miracle-Working in Mark’s Gospel and the Second Temple Period*, WUNT 2. Reihe 491 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 12–13n15.

practice was purged of pagan syncretism, and therefore deemed acceptable within Judaism.⁶² Literature from the period recast famous heroes of the Hebrew Bible as exorcists.⁶³ Erkki Koskenniemi suggests this practice may have served the purpose of legitimizing exorcists by tying their practices to noted men of God.⁶⁴ Even if this were not the intended purpose of creating such biblical embellishments, it may have been the result. The literature from the time of Jesus indicates that professional healers or exorcists could have practiced their craft within the monotheism of Second Temple Judaism.

Not only is it possible to establish that healers and miracle workers could have earned a living in Jesus's day, there are examples of people who appear to have done just that. As Paul Achtemeier observes, both Gentiles and Jews "had their famous wonder-workers."⁶⁵ Josephus mentions Honi the Circle-drawer, who was noted for calling on God for rain.⁶⁶ He also mentions Eleazar, whom Kollman rightly refers to as a professional exorcist.⁶⁷ The Mishnah characterizes Hanina ben Dosa as a "man of good deeds" or "miracle worker."⁶⁸ Eric Eve poses the possibility that the "many healers" of Mark 5:26 and the unnamed exorcist of Mark 9:38 could have also fallen into the category of professional healers.⁶⁹ These examples suggest that at least a few people around the time of Jesus made their living from healing and casting out demons.⁷⁰ If Jesus were to be regarded as a professional healer, he would not have been alone in such a field.

⁶² Bernd Kollmann, *Jesus und die Christen als Wundertäter: Studien zu Magie, Medizin und Schamanismus in Antike und Christentum*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 170 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 169.

⁶³ Abraham in *Jub.* 11:18–22, David in Pseudo-Philo, *Lib. Ant. Bib.* 60:1–3, and especially Solomon in Josephus, *A. J.* 8.42–49; 11Q11 2.2–3; and *Apoc. Adam* 7:13.

⁶⁴ Erkki Koskenniemi, *The Old Testament Miracle-Workers in Early Judaism*, WUNT 2. Reihe 206 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 52, 295.

⁶⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Jesus and the Miracle Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 211.

⁶⁶ Josephus, *A. J.* 14.22–25.

⁶⁷ Josephus, *A. J.* 8.46–49; Kollmann, *Wundertäter*, 149.

⁶⁸ *m. Ber.* 5:5; *m. Sot.* 9:15.

⁶⁹ Eve, *Miracles*, 357. For an in-depth description of the various people known as miracle-workers in Jesus's day, see Achtemeier, *Miracle Tradition*, 193–219.

⁷⁰ In concluding his review of the data, Michael Becker states, "the existence of such practitioners is certain" ("die Existenz zugehöriger Praktiker als gesichert gilt") (*Wunder und Wundertäter im frührabbinischen Judentum: Studien zum Phänomen und seiner*

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

The Gospels clearly portray Jesus as a healer and exorcist. The summaries of his ministry that appear periodically throughout the Gospels invariably mention him healing the sick and/or casting out demons (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:34, 39; 6:19; 9:6, 11; 13:32; John 6:2). Like apprentices learning a trade, the disciples of Jesus were trained and sent out to do the same (Matt 10:8; Mark 6:13; Luke 9:6). Jesus was by no means merely “a folk-healer *simpliciter*,”⁷¹ yet healing was clearly a crucial part of his ministry. His status as a healer seems to have been a primary reason for his popularity with the crowds (Matt 14:14, 35–36; Mark 6:56; Luke 5:15). Furthermore, Jesus did not hold any other occupation during the time of his ministry. The women mentioned in Luke 8:2–3 may have provided all of the financial support needed, or further support may have been given by the families of those healed.⁷² Regardless, those looking at Jesus’s work from the outside would have assumed his livelihood was coming from healing and exorcisms, as it did for other professional healers.⁷³

Within the culture of his day, Jesus fell within the rubric of “miracle-worker” or “folk-healer” with regard to the way in which he supported himself and his disciples. With that in mind, it makes sense why, for him, healing would be disallowed on the Sabbath. Returning to Hagner: “If Jesus were regarded as a healer, furthermore, then any kind of healing by his agency whatsoever would probably have been regarded as work.”⁷⁴ A merchant should not strike a deal on the Sabbath, even though no physical labor would be involved. Similarly, Jesus the healer could not practice his occupation on the Sabbath, despite only speaking a few words.

Given this understanding, the key tension point of the Sabbath controversies is not proper Sabbath practice, but rather Jesus’s identity and vocation. Was Jesus a healer, like many others? Then healing on the Sabbath was forbidden. However, for the Messiah, such healing would

Überlieferung im Horizont von Magie und Dämonismus, WUNT 2. Reihe 144 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002], 266).

⁷¹ Eve, *Miracles*, 360.

⁷² At least in the case of Mary Magdalene, these two categories overlap (Luke 8:2–3).

⁷³ The same could likely be said of Jesus’s followers. See Giovanni Battista Bazzana, “Early Christian Missionaries as Physicians: Healing and Its Cultural Value in the Greco-Roman Context,” *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009): 235–38. He concludes the instructions to the disciples in Matt 10 and Luke 10 describe medical practice of the day.

⁷⁴ Hagner, “Sabbath Controversies,” 241.

be lawful because the Messiah would perform miracles for others, not for financial gain (Isa 35:5–6; Mal 4:2). With this reading, the connection between the stories of the disciples plucking grain and the man with the withered hand becomes clear. When the Pharisees speak against the disciples plucking grain, Jesus rebuts them by saying “the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28 *par*). This statement provides background for the healing narrative. A healer would be forbidden from plying his trade on the Sabbath. But if Jesus is truly “lord of the Sabbath,” it is lawful for him to heal on the Sabbath, because healing is not his primary profession. When he heals the man, Jesus is not earning a living; he is simply doing good (Mark 3:4).

This section has attempted to show the logic behind the Sabbath controversies. No physical labor was involved in the Sabbath healings, but rest from physical labor was not the essential Sabbath command as understood in the first century C.E. Instead, it was forbidden for a person to practice their profession on the Sabbath. For those who considered Jesus to be a professional healer, the Sabbath healings would have represented a transgression of the most fundamental Sabbath law.

IV. Summary

Meier’s two main arguments against the historicity of the Sabbath healing controversies have been shown to be faulty. He argues that healing on the Sabbath could not have been a matter of controversy in the first century C.E. due to the lack of Jewish evidence for prohibitions against such healing. Yet the exact thing could be said regarding Christian sources. Either the Gospels reflect the *Sitz im Leben* of the early Christian church, or they portray a historical controversy regarding Jewish law. If external sources are silent on both sides, the decision should be in favor of the documents informed by eyewitnesses. While Meier further argues that a controversy arising from Jesus’s healing would be illogical, it was shown that the logic depends upon a proper understanding of Sabbath rest.

Finally, one might ask whether the religious leaders were justified in accusing Jesus of carrying out his profession on the Sabbath. We would answer in the affirmative if it were assumed that Jesus was first and foremost a healer. This was likely the way in which most people viewed him, but the Gospels show that it was not how he viewed himself. He was the Messiah (Matt 16:16–17; Mark 14:61–62), the one sent to proclaim the kingdom of God (Matt 4:23; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:43). In John Jesus is the one sent from the Father (John 5:36–37; 6:57; etc.).

CAMPBELL: TO SAVE A LIFE

Jesus viewed himself as living out a calling according to the will of God. Healing was a part of that calling, but it was not the essential core of his mission. Furthermore, Jesus's calling was purely focused on benefiting other people. He did not heal to support himself, he healed to bring peace and wholeness to the lives of others. In doing so, he was benefiting humanity, for whom the Sabbath was made (Mark 2:27).

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