

method of dealing with sin until Yeshua arrived, and then did it cease having this function? Here is where we get tripped up with our English word “until.” Generally, “until” means “up to a certain point and no further.” For example: “you’ll sit at this table, young man, until you finishing eating your peas!” That means the child sits there until he finishes his peas, and then (and only then) he leaves the table and no longer sits at it. But neither the Hebrew word עד (*ad*, which is often translated “until”) nor the Greek word $\alpha\chi\rho\iota$ (*axri*) translated “until” in our verse, is bound to this meaning. Both words may have the sense of “marking a continuous extent of time up to a point”⁵ but without necessarily implying that something ceases at that point.

A good example of this is the use of *axri*, the very word in our text, found in Job 32:11 of the Lxx:

Hearken to my words; for I will speak in your hearing, until (*axri*)
you shall have tried the matter with words.

These are the words of Elihu who had remained silent because of his youth. When he did speak, he asked the “friends” of Job to listen to his words *until* they understood his point. Now this does not mean that after they had come to understand his argument they would no longer listen to his words. Rather, the use of the preposition *axri*⁶ means “listen to my words with a view to understanding what I am saying.” The preposition *axri* designates the goal to which his words proceeded, namely, that they should understand his argument.

Axri is used the same way in Galatians 3:19. Paul’s meaning is that the Torah was given as a revelation of how God would deal with sin, a revelation that always had the Messiah and His saving work as the goal. It is not that the Torah ceases to function in this way once Messiah has come, but simply that the Torah’s revelation of God’s method of forgiving sin always had Yeshua in focus. In other words, the revelation of the Torah in terms of how God forgives transgressions functioned throughout the millennia as a witness to Messiah’s sacrifice for sin. This is exactly what Paul means when He writes in Rom 10:4

5 BDAG, ad loc, $\alpha\chi\rho\iota$.

6 In Job 32:11, the Greek $\alpha\chi\rho\iota$ translates the Hebrew preposition עד , *ad*, often translated “until.” This Hebrew word may also have the sense of “with a view towards” or “marking continuous time up to a particular time or event.” Note Ps 110:1, “Sit at My right hand until (עד) I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” This verse, referring to the session of Yeshua in the heavenlies, does not mean that once His enemies are subdued, He no longer sits at the right hand of the Father. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that Yeshua, in His high priestly work, secures both the blessing of His own people as well as the destruction of His enemies. His “sitting” (session) is “with a view toward” the subduing of His enemies.

that Yeshua is the “goal (τέλος, *telos*) of the Torah with regard to righteousness.” Thus, one of the main reasons that the Torah was given was to demonstrate God’s way of dealing with transgressions, ultimately pointing to the Seed through Whom the promise of blessing given to Abraham would be realized.

Summary – What Did Animal Sacrifices Accomplish?

We have seen that the animal sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple did have a valid function, namely, effecting ritual purity and thus allowing the person or object that had become ritually impure to return to an acceptable status for participation in worship at the Tabernacle or Temple. In this sense, the animal sacrifices made atonement for the ritual impurities that separated a person from participation in the Tabernacle or Temple services. We have also noted that the sacrifices offered divine revelation about how God would forgive sins eternally (the innocent One paying the penalty for the guilty sinner), and how a person’s heart or conscience could be cleansed from the guilt of sin. We have seen the distinction between temporal and eternal atonement, the former dealing with the earthly Tabernacle or Temple, and the latter having to do with God’s declaration of a sinner as eternally and completely forgiven on the basis of Yeshua’s sacrifice for sin.

What Does This Mean for Us?

Once we have seen how the Scriptures describe what the animal sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple actually accomplished, we can see that they never detracted from the once-for-all-time sacrifice of Yeshua. Since the animal sacrifices were never given to make the infinite payment for sin which God requires, a payment only the infinite and eternal Son of God could accomplish, we recognize that *offering a sacrifice at the Tabernacle or Temple could in no way diminish the value of Messiah’s death*. Only if the Scriptures taught that animal sacrifices actually did make eternal payment for sin before the coming of Yeshua, could offering them after Yeshua’s death signal a disregard for what He had accomplished. In fact, the offering of sacrifices, rather than detracting from Yeshua, the sacrifices point to His work of redeeming sinners.

We know that the Apostles never considered that offering sacrifices at the Temple might be construed as a disregard for the high and eternal value of Yeshua’s death. For instance, when Paul returned to Jerusalem after being sent out by the assembly at Antioch, it was told to him how many of the believing Jews in Jerusalem had heard false rumors about him, that he was teaching the Jewish people to forsake the Torah (Acts 21:20–21). James and the other Apos-

tles knew this was entirely false and so they made a plan to prove to the Jerusalem community that Paul did live in accordance with the Torah himself, and that he taught others to do the same. The plan they agreed upon was to have Paul go to the Temple to participate with four other men who were completing their Nazirite vows as well, and to pay for their expenses in the whole matter (Acts 21:23–24). Obviously, the completion of a Nazirite vow required the offering of a sacrifice (Num 6:13ff). Clearly the Apostles could not have encouraged Paul to undertake this duty if they had the slightest notion that offering a sacrifice was an affront to the death of Yeshua.

The same is true of all believers in Yeshua who lived before the destruction of the Temple. If they traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, as the Torah commanded, they would have brought their Pesach sacrifice, offering it at the Temple and eating it at their Seder. The same would have been true for the other pilgrimage festivals (Shavuot and Sukkot), regarding which the Torah requires that the adult men of the family not come “empty-handed,” by which is meant that they were to bring the appropriate sacrifices and tithes (Deut 16:16). What is more, those believers living near the Temple would have doubtlessly participated in the Temple services, as did Peter and John (Acts 3:1), celebrating the daily services which were marked by the offering of the daily sacrifices. Had they thought that the sacrifices somehow diminished the glory and finality of the death of Yeshua, surely they would not have participated.

Moreover, if the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple actually did make an eternal and acceptable payment for one’s sin, there would have been no need for Yeshua to die. Does anyone really think that God would have given His own dear Son to be sacrificed for the sins of His people if the sacrifice of an animal would have sufficed to do the same thing? But the reality is, as we have shown, that the animal sacrifices never did take away sin in an eternal or ultimate sense. This is because sin is an infinite transgression against the infinite holiness of God, and therefore only an infinite sacrifice, the death of the eternal and sinless Son of God, could make such payment.

How Can We Live According to the Torah and Not Bring Sacrifices?

The Torah is clear that sacrifices are to be brought only to the Temple (the place where God chooses to put His name) and they must be offered by recognized priests serving in the Temple. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, it has therefore been impossible to bring sacrifices because to offer sacrifices elsewhere or without a *bona fide* priesthood would actually be in violation of the Torah commandment (cf. Deut 12:5ff; Num 3:10, etc.). Since it is impossible to fulfill the commandments of the Torah regarding the offer-

ing of sacrifices, does this mean that it is impossible to keep the Torah altogether? Or to ask the question another way: does our inability to carry out the commandments that require a Temple and priesthood mean that obeying the other commandments is actually moot? If we can't obey the many commandments attached to the Temple and priesthood, should we presume that obeying the remainder of the Torah is irrelevant, since to transgress one commandment is to transgress them all (cf. James 2:10)?

We know intuitively that this line of thinking is wrong. Does anyone really believe that if a person cannot keep all of the commandments perfectly, they should just give up trying to obey any of God's commandments? Obviously, that argument flies in the face of the many Scriptures that enjoin God's people to obey His commandments. But it also neglects to take seriously what the Scriptures themselves teach about obeying God's commandments.

First, when James writes that "whoever keeps the whole Torah and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all," he is not suggesting that if a person sins, he should just "give up" trying to live obediently. The context makes it clear that James is exhorting his readers to live in obedience to the "Torah of liberty" (2:12). What James is expressing is the unity of the Torah. One cannot "pick and choose." All of the commandments are linked together because they are all given by the same Law Giver. For instance, to think that I can keep the Sabbath but disregard the commandment to love my neighbor as myself, is to misunderstand the Torah and the One Who gave the Torah. That is James' point.

But we may also note Deuteronomy 30:1–3, because in this passage Moses describes the scenario that would take place if Israel were to be disobedient to the covenant and disregard God's commandments:

So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

The picture is clear: one of the curses that is enumerated in the giving of the covenant is that of exile. If Israel is disobedient to the Lord, and they refuse to repent of their waywardness, God promised that He would exile them from the Land (Deut 29:22–28). What recourse do they have in such a scenario? Is Israel forever lost if they should be exiled because of their disobedience? No. In the text quoted above, being restored from captivity is dependent upon Israel's

willingness to return to the Lord (this speaks of repentance⁷) and to obey Him. But notice carefully the words that describe such obedience: “obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today.” How could Israel, in exile, obey God in accordance with all that Moses commanded? Surely in the land of their exile there is no functioning priesthood and no established Temple. Yet in spite of the fact that they would be unable to obey the commandments related to the priesthood and Temple, *their willing obedience to the rest of the commandments is counted by God as obeying the whole.*

The same principle is therefore true for us. Even though there is currently no functioning priesthood or Temple, in God’s eyes, He counts our obedience to Him in the things we can do as a sufficiently complete demonstration of our love to Him. When we fail to obey Him, He offers a way of forgiveness our sin (1Jn 1:9), and calls us back to obedience. It is in this way that we love Him with all of our heart and all of our soul.

Will There Be Sacrifices in the Millennium?

The notion that the death of Yeshua did away with the sacrifices is also controverted by the description of the millennial Temple in Ezekiel’s prophecy. In Ezekiel 40–48, he describes in great detail a Temple that has yet to be built, and also describes many of the activities that will take place in this Temple. Note the following examples:

In the porch of the gate were two tables on each side, on which to slaughter the burnt offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. (Ezek 40:39)

Then he said to me, “The north chambers and the south chambers, which are opposite the separate area, they are the holy chambers where the priests who are near to the LORD shall eat the most holy things. There they shall lay the most holy things, the grain offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering; for the place is holy.” (Ezek 42:13)

It shall be the prince’s part to provide the burnt offerings, the grain offerings and the drink offerings, at the feasts, on the new moons and on the sabbaths, at all the appointed feasts of the house of Israel; he shall provide the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering and the peace offerings, to make atonement for the house

7 The Hebrew word for “repentance” is תְּשׁוּבָה, *t’shuvah*, which is based upon the Hebrew verb שׁוּב, *shuv*, which means “to return.” Thus, “to return to the Lord” is the way that the Hebrew would express “repent before the Lord.”

of Israel.” (Ezek 45:17)

Here we see that in the millennial Temple, the sacrificial system is reinstated. We do not have sufficient time or space to discuss all of the issues relating to Ezekiel’s Temple, but the point that is relevant to our current study is that a Temple, which by all accounts is yet future, will see the return of all of the sacrifices, including the guilt and sin offerings. Moreover, the Prince (whom many think represents Yeshua), is also involved in the sacrificial service.

What will be the purpose of these sacrifices? I would maintain that their purpose is precisely the same as was the purpose of the sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle and former Temples: 1) as part of what the Torah requires for a purifying objects and people in order that they might be ritually pure and therefore able to participate in the Temple service. In short, to effect temporal atonement in relationship to the Temple itself, and 2) to be God’s revelation of the method by which He forgives sinners, that is, through the death of an innocent victim paying the penalty for the one who has transgressed. Even as the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and 1st and 2nd Temples foreshadowed the sacrifice of Yeshua, the “Lamb slain before the foundations of the earth,”⁸ so the sacrifices in the millennial Temple will point back to Him and His saving work on the cross as an infinite sacrifice. The former sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temples constituted a foreshadowing of Messiah’s work; the sacrifices in the millennium will be a memorial of the saving work He accomplished.

Some would argue that once the reality has come, there is no longer any need for that which illustrates the reality. In terms of our current topic, once Yeshua, the complete and infinite sacrifice, has come, there is no longer any need for the animal sacrifices that illustrate or point to His death. Yet this is to misunderstand the function of an illustration or a picture. A picture freezes in time an important event or person. This is why we look through wedding albums for years after the wedding took place. Using the logic of those who argue that once Yeshua has come, there is no longer any need for the picture of His death portrayed in the sacrifices, one might also think that a wedding album is useless to a man and his wife who have been married for many years. Yet we know that is not the case. The pictures in that album bring to one’s mind the specifics of that very important event. Similarly, only a relatively few people actually saw the crucifixion of our Messiah, Yeshua. The agony and supreme price that He paid to set us free from our sins is known to us only through the words of others. We can seek to envision what it must have been

8 Cf. Rev 5:6; 13:8 (though whether the phrase “from the foundations of the world” modifies the verb “written” or “slain” is disputed. See the NIV and the explanation in the NET Bible). That the salvation of the elect was secured even before the coming of Yeshua is clearly taught by the Apostles, cf. Eph 1:4; 2Tim 1:9.

like, and even enact dramas to appreciate more fully what our Lord underwent in His death. But I have a sense that the reinstituting of the sacrificial system in the millennial Temple, pointing as it will to the death of Yeshua, will enable those who participate to appreciate in a very real and substantial way the manner in which He gave His life for us. Like the pictures in the wedding album that bring the very moment of that grand event so clear to the memory, so the slaughter of an innocent animal on behalf of one who needs to return to ritual purity will bring in vivid relief the price that was paid for their eternal redemption.

Moreover, in the time of Yeshua's life upon this earth, the majority of Israel were blind to who He was and to the work He accomplished on the cross. In the millennial Temple, regathered Israel will not only look upon the pierced One, but will also have a new appreciation for the message previously missed in the sacrifices. Having come to confess that Yeshua truly is Israel's Messiah, the opportunity to participate in the sacrifices as a memorial to His death as the Lamb of God will be meaningful indeed!

Chapter Four

“If Yeshua and His Apostles Changed the Sabbath to Sunday, Doesn’t That Prove the Torah has been Replaced?”

The commandment to sanctify or set apart the seventh day of the week from the other six days of work is number four of the Ten Commandments:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex 20:8–12)¹

What is more, desecrating the Sabbath drew the death penalty:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you. Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed. (Ex 31:12–17)

We see this enacted in the story of the Israelite man who was gathering wood on the Sabbath:

Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath day. Those who found him

¹ Note the reiteration of the fourth commandment in Deut 5:12–15 as well.

gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. (Num 15:32–36)

In fact, the sanctity or distinction of the Sabbath was established before the Torah was ever given. In the creation narrative, we read that God distinguished the Sabbath from the six days of creation, and pronounced a special blessing with regard to the day of Sabbath:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen 2:1–3)

We also see that even before the Torah was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the distinctiveness of the Sabbath was already established in Israel, demonstrated in God’s instructions regarding the gathering of manna (Ex 16). The people were to gather manna each day but leave none of it over for the next day. When some of the people tried to store some for the next day, it became worm infested. However, on the sixth day, the people were to gather enough for two days—for the sixth day and for the Sabbath, because on the Sabbath God did not cause the manna to fall from heaven as He did each of the six days of the week. The primary reason that God gave the manna in this way was to test Israel’s willingness to obey God in a matter that required trusting Him for their sustenance:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction (בְּתוֹרָתִי, *b’torati*, “in My Torah”). On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” (Ex. 16:4–5)

From these early texts of the Torah, we may summarize a number of important facts about the Sabbath:

- 1) the Sabbath day was made distinct from the six days of work well before the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. The Sabbath day was established at the very creation of the universe.
- 2) the Sabbath day is to be observed by everyone who is part of Israel, whether native born or the “sojourner” who has joined Israel.
- 3) desecrating the Sabbath was a capital offense
- 4) the commandment to keep the Sabbath is eternal, enduring throughout “all your generations.”
- 5) the commandment to keep the Sabbath was included in the Ten Words (Commandments), marking it as equally important with the other nine.

We also discover in the words of the Prophets that the Sabbath remains viable in the millennium, when Yeshua will reign upon the earth. What is more, it is clear in these texts that the Sabbath is enjoined upon all who have attached themselves to the Lord, whether the native born of Israel or those from the nations who have come to confess the God of Israel as the One true God:

Thus says the LORD, “Preserve justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come and My righteousness to be revealed. How blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who takes hold of it; who keeps from profaning the sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

“Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant;

even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.” The Lord GOD, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, “Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.” (Is.56:1–2; 6–8)

We see that this prophecy of Isaiah finds its fulfillment at the time when the Lord gathers the dispersed of Israel, brings them to the Land, and establishes the Temple (“My house”) and its services once again, when burnt offerings and sacrifices are offered on the altar (“on My altar”). This doubtlessly pictures that which takes place in the time of restoration, or the millennial reign of the Messiah.

This prophecy of Isaiah establishes the fact that the Sabbath could not be abolished by the coming of Yeshua or by His death on the cross. For whatever is abolished by Yeshua’s death is forever abolished. Take, for instance, the

penalty of condemnation that is abolished by the death of Messiah on behalf of all who put their faith in Him. Such condemnation is “nailed” to the cross (Col 2:14). If one were to allow that something abolished by the death of Yeshua could later be reinstated, one would also have to reckon with the fact that condemnation for sin could also be reinstated. But the Scriptures are clear that when Yeshua obtained redemption for His people through His own sacrifice on the cross, the redemption is eternal:

But when Messiah appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Heb 9:11–12)

It is clear that what Yeshua accomplished in His death is eternal and irrevocable. One could never argue, then, that Yeshua abolished the Sabbath by His death, for the Sabbath is clearly in place in the time of restoration—the millennium.

But Didn't Yeshua Himself Break the Sabbath?

Many who argue that the Sabbath has been done away with, and use this to establish that the Torah has thus also been set aside, reference a number of instances in the Gospel records that they believe prove their point. But before we look at these texts specifically, we should note the precarious position such an argument presents. Surely those who believe that Yeshua disregarded the Sabbath commandment do not think that He sinned in doing so. Yet on what grounds do they hold such a position? If sin is the transgression of God's commandments (1Jn 3:4),² surely breaking the Sabbath commandment would be a sin. And if the argument is made that since Yeshua is the “Lord of the Sabbath,” He has the right to disregard this commandment, how does this align with the words of Yeshua Himself, that even the smallest stroke of the Torah is to be obeyed?

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:19)

² On the use of “lawlessness” (*ἀνομία*, *anomia*) as describing sin, cf. Matt 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12; Rom 6:19; 2Cor 6:14; 2Th 2:3, 7; Heb 1:9.

However the commandments were considered in Yeshua's day, it is eminently clear that the Sabbath commandment would not have been considered by Yeshua or His colleagues as a "least" or "small" commandment.³ It ought to give anyone pause, then, when Yeshua is accused of disregarding a commandment that is so clearly emphasized in the Bible as eternally viable, for to do so also marks Yeshua as a transgressor. But the Scriptures make it amply clear that Yeshua was without sin.⁴

Moreover, the Torah is clear that if anyone comes as a prophet and seeks to turn Israel away from obeying what God has given them, that prophet is a false prophet and is not to be followed:

But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you. (Deut 13:5)

What is more, if one argues that the Sabbath commandment is only for Jewish people and not for Gentiles who come to faith in Yeshua, or that Yeshua abolished in His death the Sabbath commandment as it pertains to Gentile believers, then to argue that Yeshua Himself disregarded the Sabbath commandment is a *non sequitur*, for Yeshua is Jewish! To maintain that the Sabbath commandment remains eternally viable for Jewish people while at the same time maintaining that Yeshua Himself disregarded the Sabbath is to affirm that Yeshua did, in fact, transgress the Torah.

It can be seen from the outset, then, that the view held by many, that Yeshua set aside the Sabbath commandment, brings grave theological problems into the discussions, proceeds on a path that is openly contradictory to the Scriptures in general and to Yeshua on words in particular, and even brings into question the very nature and work of Yeshua as God's chosen Messiah. This is in no way to say that those who believe the Sabbath has been abolished have in this affirmation denied Yeshua. What it does point out is that many who have come to believe that the Sabbath has been abolished have never fully pondered how such a position undermines a consistent Christology (doctrine of the Messiah) and Soteriology (doctrine of Salvation).

3 For further study on Matt 5:17ff, see my papers, "Matthew 5:17-20: Yeshua's View of the Torah" and "What Does 'Plerosai' (to fulfill) Mean in Matthew 5:17?", both available in the Articles section at www.torahresource.com.

4 Cf. Heb 4:15; 7:16; 1Pet 1:19; 2:22-24; 1Jn 3:3.

Picking Grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5)

Often those who believe that Yeshua set aside the Sabbath commandment appeal to the Gospel account that describes Him and His disciples walking through a field on the Sabbath. As they are going, some of the disciples pick heads of grain, rub them in their hands to separate the grain from the chaff in order to eat the grain. Some Pharisees who saw them doing this accuse them (and by extention, Yeshua Who is their teacher) of breaking the Sabbath:

At that time Yeshua went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.”
(Matt 12:1–2)

Following this, Yeshua answers their accusation by referencing David’s eating of the Bread of the Presence (cf. 1Sam 21:1–6) even though he and his men were not of priest lineage. The Torah makes it clear that only the priests had the right to eat the Bread of the Presence. He then references the priests themselves who work on the Sabbath by offering sacrifices at the altar, a duty which required cutting, lifting, gathering, and burning, activities which the Sages prohibited on the Sabbath. He then quotes from Hosea 6:6, emphasizing that God desires covenant loyalty or faithfulness to be the basis of worship (specifically the bringing of sacrifices in the context of Hosea), not merely going through the motions.⁵ Having affirmed that “something greater than the Temple is here,” He states: “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Before we look more closely at how Yeshua’s mention of David and the priests in the Temple bolster His defense to the Pharisees, it is important to note what Yeshua does not say. If, in fact, it was Yeshua’s intention to teach that He had come to change the Torah and in specific, to do away with the Sabbath commandment, He certainly does not indicate so here. Rather than positing that He has the right and the authority to do away with the Sabbath, His argument is structured so as to prove that neither He nor His disciples have violated the Sabbath. At the conclusion of the interchange He clearly affirms that His disciples were innocent of the charges (Matt 12:7). In other words, His response to the Pharisees only makes sense if we understand its conclusion to be that the charge of the Pharisees against Yeshua’s disciples was without sufficient grounds. Moreover, had the Pharisees sustained their argument that His disciples broke the Sabbath, one would certainly think that this accusation would have been raised when they were seeking grounds for Yeshua’s

⁵ For a more thorough exposition of Matt 12:1–8 and the corresponding texts in the Synoptics, see my commentary on Matthew, 2.415ff.

execution.

But what exactly was the defense that Yeshua gave to the Pharisees? First, it should be emphasized that nowhere in the Torah of Moses is there a prohibition against picking heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath. It is true that the Torah prohibits harvesting on the Sabbath (Ex 34:21), but harvesting is distinguished from picking heads of grain, as we discover in the laws of the Sabbatical year (the *Shemitta* year). During the Sabbatical year, planting and harvesting is prohibited (Lev 25:4–5). Yet according to Ex 23:11, the poor are allowed to take from the field whatever they need (as opposed to taking only from the corners during a common year). Notice also Deut 23:25.

When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain. (Deut 23:25)

Here, to “wield a sickle” (=harvesting) is differentiated from plucking heads of grain. So while the Torah itself prohibits harvesting on the Sabbath, plucking heads of grain is not defined as harvesting and would therefore be allowed.

The Sages, however, were more strict in their definition of what constituted harvesting. In the 39 prohibited activities on the Sabbath,⁶ reaping, binding, threshing, winnowing and selecting fit from unfit produce, are included. The expanded explanation in the Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) makes it clear that detaching fruit from its source is prohibited on the Sabbath.⁷ So based upon the additional rulings of the rabbis, the disciples broke the Sabbath. But based upon the Torah itself, they did not.

Yet even though the accusation of the Pharisees was based upon their own rules and definitions, Yeshua does not discount their judgment altogether. He could have retorted that neither He nor His disciples were required to obey man-made rules, but He does not. Instead, He seeks to show the Pharisees that they were misjudging His disciples, and that if they would use “equal weights and balances” in their assessment of the situation, they would recognize that the disciples were within the bounds of Sabbath activities allowed by the Torah.

Many have wondered how Yeshua's appeal to David and his men, when they ate the Bread of the Presence in apparent violation of the Torah, could be understood to support His claim of innocence in regard to the Sabbath regulations. Some have suggested that Yeshua appeals to the rabbinic ruling of *pichuach nefesh*, which means “saving a life.” The majority of Sages held the

⁶ m.*Shabbat* 7.2; cp. Jubilees 50:12.

⁷ b.*Shabbat* 73b.

ruling that when a person's life is threatened, all Torah commandments may be suspended save three: the prohibition of 1) idolatry, 2) sexual taboos [specifically adultery and incest], and 3) murder.⁸ Now it seems likely that in the case of David and his men, who were engaged in battle, their lives may have depended upon getting food, even that which otherwise would be prohibited to them. But this could hardly have been the case with the disciples of Yeshua. Certainly their hunger was not at the point of starvation, so Yeshua's point could not have been to make a comparison with David and his men on the grounds of *pichuach nefesh*.

Others have suggested that since David was God's anointed king (even if he had yet to be recognized and coronated as such), and since he was a foreshadow of the Messiah Himself, he warranted the status of a priest⁹ and therefore had the right to eat the Bread of the Presence. The analogy is then to Yeshua as King and Priest, and that He therefore had the right to suspend certain Torah commandments. This explanation fails on several grounds. First, as noted above, it is clear that Yeshua does not agree with the Pharisees that His disciples broke the Sabbath and thus He is not giving an explanation why it was permissible for them to break the Sabbath. Secondly, Yeshua was not the one who plucked the grain and ate it—this was done by His disciples. If the argument is based upon the analogy to David as King and Priest, then it might apply to Yeshua but hardly to His disciples.

More to the point, however, is the fact that Yeshua says that David and his men “ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone” (Matt 12:4). Yet the Sages, perhaps to exonerate David, had ruled that the Bread of the Presence was no longer subject to the laws of sacrilege once the bread was removed from the Table.¹⁰ This ruling, however, seems directly contrary to Lev 24:9 which states plainly that the Bread of the Presence was to be eaten only by Aaron and his sons.

And this, it seems to me, is the crux. I think the best explanation for Yeshua's argument is simply that He is highlighting the manner in which the Pharisees dispense their *halachah* inconsistently. In regard to their *halachah*, they are using unjust weights. They exonerate David, who clearly violated Torah commandments by eating the consecrated bread, yet they condemn Yeshua and His disciples for failing to adhere to laws found nowhere in the Torah. In doing so, they have shown that they consider their own *halachah* to have a greater authority than the Torah itself. Thus, Yeshua's argument is one

8 b.*Sanhedrin* 74a; cp. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Hilchot De'ot* 6.8.

9 Cf. 2Sam 6:14, 17; 8:18 where David functions as a priest, and his sons are called “priests.”

10 m.*Meila* 1.1, cp. Maimonides, *Sefer Ha'Avodah: Hilchot Me'ilah* 2.8; m.*Zevachim* 9.5.