

The Sabbath Day: To Heal or Not to Heal

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CONTROVERSY OVER SABBATH DAY HEALINGS is but one of several kinds of sabbath day controversies that the New Testament gospels depict in Jesus' relationship with the religious authorities of his day.¹ I will examine the sabbath day healing stories in light of what we can reconstruct about Jewish sabbath day concerns of the first century. On this basis I will attempt to identify the likelihood of a historical core to these narratives.

The sabbath day controversies assume that Jesus was known in his day as a healer. The historicity of this reputation is affirmed by historical scholarship.² What is at issue for the historian are details of the narratives that report about various healings. Aspects of these stories that fit the historical setting of first-century Palestine can claim greater probability of historicity than those that reflect later theological concerns. Since the traditions about Jesus in the gospels were first transmitted orally before being written, such material must be examined for evidence of how the process of transmission affected the shape of the stories. Scholars use tradition criticism and form criticism for this purpose. Form criticism seeks to identify the shape of individual stories during the formative period of oral tradition, and tradition criticism attempts to trace their development into connected narratives. Before I examine these stories and their Jewish context, I will first catalogue the sabbath healing narratives in the gospels and note the absence of sabbath controversies in other early Christian literature.

SABBATH HEALING STORIES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The number of sabbath healing stories in the gospels is actually

1. See Arland J. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries: The Form and Function of the Conflict Stories in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979).

2. For a description of Jesus as healer, see John Dominic Crossan, "Jesus the Peasant," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 156-68, esp. 164-66.

quite few:

1. Mark 3:1-6//Matt. 12:9-14//Luke 6:6-11: Man with a Crippled Hand
2. Luke 13:10-17: Afflicted Woman
3. Luke 14:1-6: Man with Dropsy
4. John 5:1-18: Crippled Man
5. John 9:1-41: Man Born Blind

Only the story of the Man with a Crippled Hand appears in more than one source; it is found in the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because they share the same general view of Jesus and are often looked at together, they are called the “synoptic” gospels. For most scholars the best explanation for their similarities is that Mark was the earliest of the narrative gospels, probably written during or right after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.,³ and the primary source of Matthew and Luke.⁴ The arrangement of the material as found in these gospels is thus derived from Mark, where this story becomes the climax of a larger set of controversy stories, immediately preceded by the other primary story of a sabbath controversy, Picking Grain (Mark 2:23-28).⁵

The healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-31) is sometimes included in lists of sabbath day healings. The Markan framework does give it that setting, placing it right after “they left the synagogue,” which implies it is still the sabbath day (v. 21). However, the story itself contains no temporal reference, nor any suggestion of controversy, which accompanies all other sabbath day healings. The only other explicit sabbath day healing stories have but a single version. There are two such stories in Luke and two in John.

Sabbath day controversies in general, including healing on the sabbath, are noticeably absent from the rest of early Christian tradition. No mention is even made of the sabbath day in the sayings of Jesus quoted in both Matthew and Luke that are not in Mark. Scholars designate this material “Q” (from *Quelle*, German for “source”), and refer to it as *The Say-*

3. In current biblical scholarship, C.E. = Common Era (= A.D.) and B.C.E. = Before the Common Era (= B.C.).

4. For a description of the methodologies used in historical critical assessment of the synoptic gospels, see E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

5. See Joaruna Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2:1-3:6* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1973); J. D. G. Dunn, “Mark 2.1-3.6: A Bridge between Jesus and Paul on the Question of the Law,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 395-415; reprinted in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 10-36.

ings Gospel Q, even though no actual document has been found that directly corresponds to it.⁶ Q represents the primary source of Jesus' sayings, which were most likely collected in this form at least a decade or more before Mark was written. This would make Q the earliest source for historical Jesus research. The total absence of any mention of the sabbath day in Q thus suggests that the early sayings tradition did not preserve any remembrance of Jesus teaching anything about the sabbath day.

The other primary source of sayings of Jesus is the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, part of an ancient Christian library found in Egypt in 1945. Thomas, as we now have it, is from the fourth century and written in Coptic, but there are three fragments in Greek that represent an earlier second-century text. Many scholars are now convinced that Thomas contains some traditions as early as those found in Q.⁷ Because Thomas is entirely a collection of sayings of Jesus, its discovery has added credence to the significance of the Q hypothesis, that the earliest traditions about Jesus were sayings collections. Together, Thomas and Q would thus be the earliest sources available for understanding the historical Jesus. Thomas does contain one saying, unattested elsewhere, that mentions the sabbath day: "If you do not keep the sabbath as a sabbath, you will not see the Father" (27:2). It is not clear what this saying means; it appears to be some kind of endorsement, although Thomas more typically criticizes shallow piety.⁸ Whatever its original significance, this saying does not shed any light on the controversy surrounding sabbath day healings.

Outside of the gospels, neither Paul nor Acts rehearses any sabbath day issues. Acts asserts that Paul's custom was to go to the synagogue on the sabbath day (17:2; cf. 13:14; 18:4), which probably reflects Luke's stereotype of early Jewish-Christian practice. In contrast, Paul never mentions the sabbath day in particular, but rather declares the whole matter of observing special days a non-issue: "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" whether they should "judge one day to be better than another" (Rom. 14:5). In fact, elsewhere Paul responds to gentile converts who take up Jewish observance of "special days" by fretting that his work "may have been wasted" (Gal. 4:10-11). Later in the Pauline tradition, the letter to the Colossians reaffirms Christian freedom regarding

6. For a comprehensive description, see Arland D. Jacobson, *The First Gospel: An Introduction to Q* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992).

7. For a careful analysis of the relationship of Thomas to the synoptic gospels, see Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1993). For an introduction and translation of both Q and Thomas, see John Kloppenborg et. al., *Q-Thomas Reader* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1990).

8. Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas*, 86, 148. The phrase could also be translated, "keep the whole week as a sabbath" (Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992], 82).

Jewish practices, including "sabbaths" (2:16).⁹

In other early Christian writings contemporary with the New Testament, the so-called "Apostolic Fathers" from the second century often preserve earlier traditions. The anonymous letter attributed to Barnabas, probably written during the first third of the second century, devotes a chapter to reinterpreting the scriptural (Old Testament) traditions about the sabbath day. It endorses "the eighth day" celebration for Christians (Barn. 15:9). Another anonymous letter, formally addressed to someone named Diognetus, probably around the end of the second century, sets out the contrasts between Christian and Jewish religious practices. It talks about "sabbath superstition" and calls it "impious falsely to accuse God of forbidding that a good deed should be done on the sabbath day" (Diog. 4:3).

The New Testament gospels alone preserve any tradition about Jesus associated with sabbath day controversies. The earliest material in the sayings gospels of Q and Thomas does not preserve any controversial teaching of Jesus on the sabbath day, and the Christian writings of the second century attributed to the "Apostolic Fathers" present little reason to attach special significance to the sabbath day. Only the narrative gospels in the New Testament describe controversy over sabbath day healings. These stories must be examined in the context of their own social world, which included the formation of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

THE RABBINIC DEBATE: "WHAT IS PERMITTED ON THE SABBATH DAY?"

Sabbath day legal regulations are a well-known feature of rabbinic Judaism. Strict observance of sabbath day prohibitions against "work" became a significant part of prescribed religious practices. These traditions have their roots in Jewish oral Torah as it developed during Second Temple Judaism.¹⁰

Evidence for this can be seen in the editing process that shaped the Hebrew scriptures. "The Law" and "The Prophets," the first two sections of the Bible, received their final form during the period of the Second Temple. The Creation story placed at the beginning of the scriptures made sabbath day rest the culminating goal of creation itself (Gen. 2:2-3)

9. Although Colossians is attributed to Paul, many scholars think its rhetorical style is not that of Paul himself, but reflects a later co-worker, writing after Paul's death.

10. See I. Abrahams, "The Sabbath," *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917), 129-35; Lawrence H. Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1991), 251-52; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief: 63 BCE-55 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 208-11.

and the most elaborate of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). Its violation was punishable by death (Ex. 31:15-16; Num. 15:32-36).

In the last section of Hebrew scripture, "The Writings," which were not edited until after the destruction of the Second Temple, Nehemiah is credited with instigating enforcement of sabbath day restrictions back during the restoration of the Temple in the fifth century (13:15-22). In a second-century B.C.E. retelling of Genesis, the book of Jubilees elaborates on the laws for keeping the sabbath day, declaring that "anyone who will do any work therein . . . will surely die forever" (2:27).¹¹

The extent of sabbath day practice is evident in sanctions against even military activity. Enemy military commanders adopted the practice of attacking on the sabbath day, knowing the Israelites or Judeans would not fight back. Historians have reconstructed that major defeats in Israel's history occurred on sabbath days.¹²

A reinterpretation of sabbath day rest emerged from the experiences of the Maccabees in the second century B.C.E., during their struggle to recapture control of the Temple from the Syrians. As told in the Old Testament Apocrypha, after suffering many casualties on a sabbath day attack, they resolved not to be destroyed for refusing to defend themselves: "Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the sabbath day; let us not all die as our kindred died in their hiding places" (1 Macc. 2:41). The Jewish historian Josephus, writing toward the end of the first century C.E., emphasizes that this meant "only in self-defense will Jews fight on the Sabbath" (*Jewish War* 1.145). This interpretation became normative among prominent groups of Jews, without any weakening of the claim that the sabbath day was being fully observed. Josephus can still insist: "It was known even to the Romans that [the Jews] did no work of any kind when the seventh day came round" (4.98).¹³

In addition to the new interpretation permitting self-defense on the sabbath day, most interpretations had already allowed for "life saving" activity on the sabbath day. The traditions of the early rabbis are preserved in the Mishnah, a collection of legal opinions edited at the end of the second century C.E., including this teaching from an early second-century rabbi: "If a man has a pain in his throat they may drop medicine into his

11. See James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 58.

12. Gerhard F. Hasel, "Sabbath," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:849-56. Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 260, relates this wartime concern over the sabbath to the gospel of Mark as a wartime gospel.

13. For discussion of the evidence, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974, 1980, 1984), citations in index: "Sabbath—defence forbidden on."

mouth on the Sabbath, since there is doubt whether life is in danger, and whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath."¹⁴ To more fully appreciate this kind of logic, we must consider the rabbinic arguments over sabbath day cures. Alongside other traditions regarding apparent exemptions for sabbath day activities, there are those that focus explicitly on matters related to health and healing.

The Mishnah includes these sabbath day regulations regarding healing:

Greek hyssop [a cure for worms] may not be eaten on the Sabbath, because it is not a food for healthy people. . . . One may eat any foodstuffs that serve for healing or drink any liquids except purgative water or a cup of root-water, since these serve to cure jaundice; but one may drink purgative water to quench one's thirst, and one may anoint oneself with root-oil if it is not used for healing. If [on the sabbath day] someone's teeth pain him he may not suck vinegar through them but he may take vinegar after his usual fashion [at a meal], and if he is healed he is healed.¹⁵

From this E. P. Sanders formulates the implied rule, "no minor cures," since life-threatening conditions were exempt.¹⁶

A tradition preserved in the Tosefta, material supplementary to the Mishnah, attempts to clarify the matter:

They do not chew balsam-resin on the Sabbath.
Under what circumstances?
When it is intended for a remedy.
But if it is on account of bad breath, this is permitted.¹⁷

Neusner deduces this generalization: "One may not do something solely for the purpose of healing, but if healing results from doing what is permissible, there is no objection."¹⁸

In Tosefta *Sabbath* 15:15 even this restriction was given a very generous interpretation:

They heat water for a sick person on the Sabbath, whether to give it to him to drink or to heal him with it. And they do not say, "Wait on him, perhaps he'll

14. Tractate ("section") *Yoma* 8.6b, *The Mishnah*, trans. H. Danby (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 172.

15. Tractate *Sabbath* 14:3, 4, trs. Danby, 113.

16. E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 13.

17. Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta. Second Division. Moed: The Order of Appointed Times* (New York: Ktav, 1977), *Sabbath* 12:8.

18. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Appointed Times. Part One: Shabbat. Translation and Explanation* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 141.

live [without it]." But a matter of doubt concerning him overrides [the prohibitions of] the Sabbath. And the doubt need not be about this Sabbath, but it may be about another Sabbath.

Such an open-ended definition suggests that the principle, "when in doubt," was subject to widely varying interpretations.

This logic is further supported in the next section, *Sabbath* 15:16, by arguments derived from the examples of circumcision and Temple service as bases for overriding the Sabbath:

Now if the Temple service overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath, and a matter of doubt concerning the safety of life overrides it, the Sabbath, which the Temple service overrides—all the more so should matters of doubt concerning the saving of life override it. Thus you have learned that a matter of doubt concerning the saving of life overrides the Sabbath.

The rabbinic material we have just considered was written after the destruction of the Temple, as were the New Testament gospels. Both traditions are thus presented from the perspective of hindsight, which assumes a future without the Temple. As we analyze what the gospels can tell us about the historical Jesus, we must be very cautious in how we use these later written traditions in evaluating the likelihood of Jesus' sabbath day activity in the first third of the first century in Galilee.

We can now make an initial assessment of the historical probability of certain general features of Jewish sabbath day practice in first-century Palestine.

1. *There was an ongoing debate over sabbath day issues.* Sanders "can well believe that there were in Galilee radicals who questioned any unusual activity on the sabbath," but actual incidents "were extremely minor in the context of the period."¹⁹ There is no scholarly consensus on the extent to which such individuals would have been "Pharisees," who were mostly bureaucrats and educators.²⁰ Their likely presence in Galilee at the time of Jesus cannot easily be disputed, but the amount of influence they had on synagogue life certainly can.²¹ Learned Pharisees, "the scholars" (called scribes in the KJV), are less likely to have been in the villages of rural Galilee than in more urban settings. Therefore, one could argue that it was more likely outside of Palestine in the Hellenistic cities of the Jewish diaspora, such as Antioch, that Jesus' followers first encountered strong opposition from synagogue Judaism—not controlled by Pharisees,

19. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 22.

20. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:289-303, see 302.

21. Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 257; Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 398.

as well as the challenge from Paul (Gal. 2).²²

2. *Pharisees would not have actively hassled "faith healers" over sabbath violations, especially in synagogues or at dinner parties.* Sanders finds "no indication that the Pharisees tried to impose their own rules on others."²³ They were likely admired, respected, and popular,²⁴ but not powerful enough to impose themselves on those outside their sphere of influence.

3. *There already existed in the early first century a body of precedent-setting Jewish oral tradition about sabbath day cures.* Sanders asserts: "So many particulars are debated in rabbinic literature that we may assume that the understanding 'no minor cures' is early, probably pharisaic," and the rule "doubt whether life is in danger overrides the sabbath" "would have been the common understanding" since the first century B.C.E.²⁵

4. *The death penalty was never applied, or even tried to be, to sabbath violations.* The normative interpretation of the law that emerged by the time of the Mishnah (200 C.E.) contrasted acting "wantonly" with acting "in error" (*Sanhedrin* 7.8). A general rule was formulated: "Whosoever, forgetful of the principle of the Sabbath, committed many acts of work on many Sabbaths, is liable to one Sin-offering" (*Sabbath* 7.1). Even when someone knew that it was the Sabbath, a lenient interpretation excused them for acting inadvertently. Sanders thus concludes that the Mishnah "makes the death penalty virtually impossible" to apply, and its strict features were probably "never enforced anywhere." Since the Mishnah is the legacy of the Pharisees, it is most unlikely "that Pharisees sought the death penalty for minor transgressions of the sabbath."²⁶

These results can now be applied to the sabbath healing stories in the New Testament. Our analysis will seek to trace especially the editorial developments in the gospels that reflect the contemporary practices of rabbinic Judaism.

SABBATH DAY HEALING CONTROVERSIES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Mark. Mark's narrative structure gives early importance to sabbath day controversies. Jesus begins his public activity in Capernaum, where "on the sabbath day he went right to the synagogue and started teaching" (1:21).²⁷ The summary statement that follows already contrasts Jesus

22. Dunn finds here, "A Bridge between Jesus and Paul on the Question of the Law" (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 10-36).

23. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 12.

24. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 402.

25. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 13.

26. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

27. The translations from the gospels are taken, with some modification by the author, from Robert Miller, *The Complete Gospels* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992).

with “the scholars” (v. 22), who emerge as opponents in the return trip to Capernaum (2:1-12), and in the scene at Levi’s house, where they are identified as “the Pharisees’ scholars” (v. 16).²⁸

When the sabbath day becomes an explicit issue, the challengers are identified as “the Pharisees.” In response to the disciples picking grain on the sabbath day, they put the question: “Why are they doing what’s not permitted on the sabbath day?” (2:24). This concern becomes one of the caricatures of the Pharisees. Jesus responds both with a defense from scripture (vv. 25-26), the story of David from 1 Samuel 21:1-6, and with a pronouncement (vv. 27-28):

The sabbath day was created for Adam and Eve,
not Adam and Eve for the sabbath day.
So, the son of Adam lords it even over the sabbath day.²⁹

This sets up the first major showdown in Mark’s narrative, a controversy based on Jesus’ first reported sabbath day healing:

1. Then he went back to the synagogue, and a fellow with a crippled hand was there. 2. So they kept an eye on him, to see whether he would heal the fellow on the sabbath day, so they could denounce him. 3. And he says to the fellow with the cripple hand, “Get up here in front of everybody.” 4. Then he asks them, “On the sabbath day is it permitted to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?”

But they maintained their silence. 5. And looking right at them with anger, exasperated at their obstinacy, he says to the fellow, “Hold out your hand!”

He held it out and his hand was restored. 6. Then the Pharisees went right out with the Herodians and hatched a plot against him, to get rid of him (3:1-6).

The setting, back in the synagogue (v. 1), creates the expectation that a new level of tension is at hand. The challengers are not actually identified, but the repeat of “the Pharisees” at the end of the story (v. 6) implies they are also the opponents here.

They are pictured as intentionally trying to catch Jesus on the explicit basis of healing someone “on the sabbath day” (v. 2). Jesus silences them by putting the question: “On the sabbath day is it permitted to do good

28. The translation “scholars” is used for the traditional “scribes” to convey better the significance of their role in the gospels as interpreters of scripture.

29. The translations “Adam and Eve” and “son of Adam” (= “man” and “son of man”) are meant to make explicit that this is a claim on behalf of all humankind. Compare the rabbinic tradition in Jacob Neusner, *Mekhilta according to Rabbi Ishmael: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 81.3, 8, *Shabbata on Exod 31:13*, Rabbi Simeon says, “The Sabbath is handed over to you, and you are not handed over to the Sabbath.”

or to do evil, to save life or do destroy it?" (v. 4). Jesus' qualification to doing good, "to save life," is presented by Mark as a recognizable exemption to sabbath restrictions. In terms of the later rabbinic debates, Jesus' defiant healing of the crippled hand (v. 5) would seem to be "blatantly intentional." However, because he accomplishes the healing merely by speaking to the fellow, "no work was performed."³⁰ The Pharisees are nonetheless portrayed as plotting against Jesus' life merely on the basis of the healing (v. 6).

An earlier healing had begun this controversy section with the charge, "He's blaspheming!" (2:7). In Mark's perspective, blasphemy was the basis on which the religious authorities would later decide on the death penalty for Jesus (14:64). Mark thus begins the first controversy section with a story charging Jesus with a capital offense, and then concludes the controversy section with another apparent capital offense, healing on the sabbath day. The narrative moves on and sabbath day activity is never again a controversy. Has Mark blown this issue totally out of proportion or is it possible to locate a plausible first-century setting for such tension over sabbath day healing?

Our earlier assessment of the rabbinic tradition suggests that Mark's picture is more caricature than it is historical. Although Mark's narrative setting couples sabbath healing with blasphemy as offenses equally liable to the death penalty, the historical likelihood of Pharisees responding with a death threat to a faith healer's words claiming "to save life" seems virtually impossible. It is also most unlikely that Jesus ever "staged" a public healing on a sabbath day, or directly questioned Pharisees about sabbath day regulations just before healing someone. It is more plausible that Jesus would have consented to heal someone's condition, even though it was not literally life-threatening, on what was inadvertently a sabbath day. It is also plausible that some "scholars" might have challenged Jesus about it afterward. That all of this would have happened in a synagogue, however, is unlikely. Thus the story as Mark tells it has some plausible features, but it cannot be taken as a reliable report of an actual incident.

Matthew. The version of this same story in Matthew (12:9-14) appears to be edited from Mark 3. Matthew keeps it in the same general sequence immediately after the sabbath day controversy over picking grain (vv. 1-8). Matthew's editorial changes in that story already indicate how much Matthew pictures Jesus as a master of rabbinic argumentation. In Mark Jesus refers to the story of David eating bread normally reserved for priests (Mark 2:25-26). Matthew adds significant rabbinic-like material to Jesus' defense:

30. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 21.

5. Haven't you read in the Law that during the sabbath day the priests violate the sabbath in the temple and are held blameless? 6. Yet I say to you, someone greater than the temple is here. 7. And if you had known what this means, "It's mercy I desire instead of sacrifice," you would not have condemned those who are blameless (Matt. 12:5-7).

This material is all unique to Matthew. The proof-text quoted in v. 7 (Hosea 6:6) is also used in 9:13. Here it extends the rabbinic principle, "temple service takes precedence over the sabbath day."³¹ Jesus "one ups" the Pharisees by employing a formal rabbinic argument, from "the lesser" to "the greater," which became normative rabbinic interpretation after the destruction of the Temple.³² Here Jesus makes the claim for something even "greater than the temple" (v. 6). In this context in Matthew Jesus is thus made to vouch for the future authority claimed by the Matthean community.

Matthew now pictures Jesus moving into "their synagogue" (v. 9), apparently referring back to the "the Pharisees" in verse 2, whom he had just outwitted.³³ Suddenly there is an opportunity for them to try again:

10. Just then a fellow with a crippled hand appeared, and they asked him, "Is it permitted to heal on the sabbath day?" so they could discredit him.

11. He asked them, "If you had only a single sheep, and it fell into a ditch on the sabbath day, wouldn't you grab on to it and pull it out? 12. A person is worth considerably more than a sheep. So, it is permitted to do good on the sabbath day!" (Matt. 12:10-12)

Unlike in Mark, where Jesus takes the initiative, here the Pharisees again lead, posing the challenging question (v. 10).

Jesus' response in Matthew (v. 11) assumes a consensus between Jesus and the Pharisees for the later dominant rabbinic interpretation.³⁴ This more "liberal" position contrasts the more "literal" interpretation

31. The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 132b) derives this from the Mishnah (Shabbat 19), which establishes the precedence of circumcision over the sabbath day. The Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbat 19:1 VII.C.) declares that public sacrifice overrides the prohibitions of the sabbath day; see Jacob Neusner, *Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation*, Vol. 11. *Shabbat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 455.

32. Louis Jacobs, "Hermeneutics," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), 8:cols. 366-72.

33. Scholars infer that Matthew is contrasting "their synagogue" and rabbinic Judaism as derived from the Pharisees, with "our synagogue" and the Jewish-Christian community of Matthew's "church" as derived from Jesus. See Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 173.

34. For rabbinic citations, see Samuel T. Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1987), 200; Paul Billerbeck and Hermann L. Strack, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1922-26), 1:629-30.

practiced, for example, by the ancient Jewish community that produced the "Damascus Rule," first discovered in Cairo a century ago (and designated "CD"). Several fragmented copies were found among the first-century C.E. Dead Sea Scrolls, attributed to the Jewish sect called the Essenes. Here a stricter interpretation is given: "No one shall assist an animal to give birth on the sabbath day. And if it should fall into a cistern or pit, it should not be lifted out on the sabbath day" (CD 11:13-14). This seems to reject the allowance made in what became the normative rabbinic position in the Mishnah: "They may not deliver the young of cattle on a Festival day, but they may give [indirect] help" (*Sabbath* 18:3).³⁵

Jesus then uses the classic rabbinic argument from lesser to greater, "a person is worth more," to arrive at a definitive decree: "So, it is permitted to do good on the sabbath day" (v. 12). This answer to the question put to Jesus probably reflects the rule of behavior Matthew's church formulated to claim it was keeping the sabbath day.³⁶ Jesus then acts in accord with the principle he has just articulated—he does something good on the sabbath day to accommodate a crippled fellow, who responds and is restored. Nonetheless, the Pharisees do not concede Jesus' stance, but rather hatch a plot to destroy him (Matt. 12:13-14). Matthew's Jesus has "out-phariseed the Pharisees" and they are not about to take it.

How should the historian assess Matthew's distinctive features in this story? In a word: anachronistic. Not only does Jesus "out-pharisee the Pharisees," he does so with argumentation techniques that rabbis perfected only after the time of Jesus. Furthermore, this is historically suspect because Jesus' reputation elsewhere suggests that he had little concern for the very issues that mattered to the Pharisees, such as purity and sabbath day regulations. It is thus much easier for the historian to find editorial bias than it is to find corroborating evidence. In fact, the editorial bias elsewhere in Matthew (e.g., chap. 23) is often highly polemical against the very form of Judaism that became dominant only toward the end of the first century. Many scholars are thus convinced that this is the most likely time frame for Matthew, and also accounts for many of Matthew's distinctive features.³⁷

35. Later rabbis clarified the acceptable kinds of help: If an animal falls into a ditch, one brings bedding to place under it, and if it climbs out it climbs out. Someone may object: If an animal falls into a ditch, one brings food to it, so that it should not perish. Well and good, if such food is available; if not, one brings bedding to place under it (*Sabbath* 128b). See Isidore Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud. Seder Mo'ed* (London: Soncino Press, 1938), 639-40.

36. Gerhard Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," 79, 91-92; Heinz Joachim Held, "Matthew as Interpreter of the Miracle Stories," 244; both in Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM, 1963); Harrington, *Matthew*, 177.

37. See, for example, J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

Luke. Luke's account of this sabbath day healing (6:6-11) is close to Mark, except that Luke explicitly identifies the challengers as "the scholars and the Pharisees" (v. 7). This is how Luke had already characterized the opponents in the earlier controversy stories (5:21, 30), the former time replacing Mark's "scholars" and the latter time adjusting Mark's unusual "the Pharisees' scholars" (2:16). Luke's Jesus again takes the initiative, now because "he knew their motives" (v. 8), not with the anger ascribed to him in Mark (3:5). Rather, it is the Pharisees who are "filled with rage," (v. 11), as was everyone after Jesus' first synagogue visit in Luke (4: 28). Their rage provokes them only to discuss "what to do with Jesus" (v. 11). The plot to destroy Jesus in Luke is attributed much later to the religious authorities in Jerusalem (19:47).

These distinctive features in Luke's version of the Man with the Withered Hand fit with Luke's general tendency to avoid having Pharisees participate in the death of Jesus. Instead, Luke pictures some Pharisees as sympathizers, who on three different occasions invite Jesus to dinner (7:36; 11:37; 14:1). Later in the book of Acts a leading Pharisee, Gamaliel, cautions against those who become enraged and want to kill the apostles (5:33-34). It is Gamaliel's student Saul/Paul (22:3) whose conversion changes the course of early Christian history, as Luke tells it. Luke's picture of the Pharisees' role in controversies with Jesus thus seems too self-serving to be of much help to the historian searching for clues about the historical Jesus.

Luke does add two unique sabbath day healing stories, both without any known parallels: 13:10-17: Afflicted Woman, and 14:1-6: Man with Dropsy, both with typical Lukan features. Although they are not directly back-to-back, these two healings form another set of male and female pairings distinctive of Luke (also 7:1-10 + 7:11-17; 15:1-7 + 15:8-10).³⁸

10. Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath day. 11. A woman showed up who for eighteen years had been afflicted by a spirit; she was bent over and unable to straighten up even a little. 12. When Jesus noticed her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are freed from your affliction." 13. He laid hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began to praise God.

14. The leader of the synagogue was indignant, however, because Jesus had healed on the sabbath. He lectured the crowd: "There are six days which we devote to work; so come on one of those days and be healed, but not on the sabbath."

15. But the Lord answered him, "You phonies! Every last one of you unties your ox or your donkey from the feeding trough on the sabbath day and

38. See, for example, Eugene Maly, "Women and the Gospel of Luke," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 10 (1980): 99-104.

leads it off to water, don't you? 16. This woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has kept in bondage for eighteen long years—should she not be released from these bonds just because it is the sabbath?" 17. As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame, but most folks rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing (Luke 13:10-17).

The Man with Dropsy story (14:1-6) is the third time Luke sets a story in a Pharisee's house at a dinner party (7:36; 11:37):

1. And so one sabbath, when Jesus happened to have dinner at the house of a prominent Pharisee, they were keeping an eye on him. 2. This man who had dropsy suddenly showed up.

3. Jesus addressed the legal experts and Pharisees: "Is it permitted to heal on the sabbath, or not?"

4. But they were silent.

So he took the man, healed him, and sent him on his way.

5. Then he said to them, "Suppose your son or your ox falls down a well, would any of you hesitate for a second to pull him out on the sabbath day?"

6. And they had no response to this (Luke 14:1-6).

Both stories contain sayings concerning the care of animals (13:15; 14:5), as we also saw in the Matthean version of the Withered Hand:

Every last one of you unties your ox or your donkey from the feeding trough on the sabbath day and leads it off to water, don't you? (Luke 13:15)

Suppose your son or your ox falls down a well, would any of you hesitate for a second to pull him out on the sabbath day? (Luke 14:5)

If you had only a single sheep, and it fell into a ditch on the sabbath day, wouldn't you grab on to it and pull it out? (Matt 12:11)

Luke 14:5 is so similar to the saying found in Matthew 12:11 that some scholars have suggested they are versions of a saying derived from the common sayings source ("Q") used by Matthew and Luke. John Kloppenborg rejects the suggestion that Luke 14:5 can be removed from its context "without destroying the story completely."³⁹ That may only suggest that the whole anecdote was formed in order to give the saying a context. In fact, Bultmann considered both of Luke's extra stories to be variants of the story in Mark 3:1-6, each composed around an isolated saying, 13:15 and 14:5.⁴⁰

39. John S. Kloppenborg, *Q Parallels: Synopsis, Critical Notes, and Concordance* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988), 160.

40. Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 12.

Since it appears that Matthew added the saying in 12:11 to a story that did not originally contain such a saying, it is likely that none of these sayings originally belonged in the narrative context in which they are now found. If so, their origin can be traced to the oral tradition of the time, in one of two ways. (1) Each one could have circulated as an isolated saying without a specific narrative setting, until someone either put it into such a story or created a story for it. (2) They did not exist as separate sayings transmitted orally, but are rather variations, even caricatures, of what became popular rabbinic tradition.

The Jesus Seminar did consider the likely historicity of these sayings in its earlier work on all the sayings attributed to Jesus.⁴¹ The saying in Luke 13:15 (with v. 16) came out black—no basis for linking it to the historical Jesus. But it was borderline on gray, since 25 percent of the votes were red or pink—a strong minority opinion that it contains a historical core. Matthew 12:11-12 and Luke 14:5 were considered together as two versions of the same saying. The vote came out a solid gray—some traces from the historical Jesus, with 42 percent of the votes red or pink—a historical core lies behind these sayings. Both votes indicate a wide range of scholarly conclusions reached by Fellows of the Jesus Seminar on the likelihood that these three sayings preserve some historical core that can be traced back to Jesus. Especially in the case of Luke's two unique stories, it seems more likely the stories were created around the sayings, than that they preserve independent reports about actual events.

John. The gospel of John contains its own two sabbath healing stories: 5:1-18: Crippled Man, and 9:1-41: Man Born Blind. These two healings are among the "miracles" of Jesus in this gospel, traditionally translated "signs" (2:11; 4:54). Scholars have concluded that these miracles were found in an early collection of such stories, which they have labelled the "Signs Gospel." In the scholarly reconstruction of the Signs Gospel, these two stories appear back to back, in reverse order, greatly reduced (9:1, 6-7[8] + 5:2-3a, 5a-9), with no mention of the sabbath day.⁴² In each story it is introduced after the healing has been narrated:

9. At once the man recovered; he picked up his mat and started walking.

Now that was a sabbath day. 10. So the Judeans said to the man who had been cured, "It's the sabbath day; you're not permitted to carry your mat around" (5:9-10).

13. They take the man who had been blind to the Pharisees. (14. It was

41. The votes are reported in issues of the Polebridge Press journal, *Foundations and Facets Forum*. The listing by chapter and verse is in vol. 6 (Mar. 1990): 3-55.

42. For the text, see the "Signs Gospel" in Miller, *Complete Gospels*, 185-86.

the sabbath day when Jesus made mud and opened his eyes.) 15. So the Pharisees asked him again how he could see (9:13-15).

Both times the editor of the gospel of John seems to have appended a sabbath controversy to a healing story that does not contain any previous mention of the sabbath day.⁴³

Raymond Brown, however, judges the sabbath motif to be integral to the healing story. His assessment is based, at least in part, on his full acceptance of the authenticity of accounts in the first three gospels:

That Jesus violated the rules of the scribes for the observance of the Sabbath is one of the most certain of all the historical facts about his ministry. From the Synoptic evidence [Matthew, Mark, and Luke] it would seem that he deliberately worked miracles on the Sabbath as test cases providing an opportunity for him to proclaim his relationship to the Law.⁴⁴

Few scholars today would voice such confidence in the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as historical records. Our analysis above has indicated the kinds of serious reservations most scholars have about treating any narrative report as "historical fact."

Unlike the other gospels, in John the sabbath debate resumes after the healing stories. In the midst of Jesus' festival discourse in 7:15-24,⁴⁵ he defends himself based on the law:

19. "Moses gave you the Law, didn't he? (Not that any of you observes the Law!) Why are you bent on killing me?"

20. The crowd answered, "You're out of your mind! Who's trying to kill you?"

21. "I do one miracle," Jesus replied, "and you're stunned! 22. That's why Moses gave you circumcision . . . and you can circumcise someone on the sabbath day. 23. If someone can be circumcised on the sabbath without breaking Moses' Law, can you really be angry with me for making someone completely well on the sabbath day? 24. Don't judge by appearances; judge by what is right" (John 7:19-24).

Jesus argues here in the same terms as the debate reflected in the later rabbinic literature, using the rabbinic style of argumentation noted above in Matthew's editing of Mark 3.

43. Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 115-17.

44. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John I-XII* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 210.

45. In Bultmann's reconstruction, 7:15-24 immediately follows the end of John 5 (Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 273).

The sabbath day controversy added to the healing in John 5 concludes with the narrator's explanation:

15. The man went and told the Judeans it was Jesus who had cured him.
16. And this is the reason the Judeans continued to hound Jesus: he would do things like this on the sabbath day.

17. Jesus would respond to them: "My Father never stops laboring, and I labor as well."

18. So this is the reason the Judeans then tried even harder to kill him: Not only did he violate the sabbath, worse still, he would call God his Father and make himself out to be God's equal (John 5:15-18).

The viewpoint expressed here probably best reflects a perspective from the end of the first century.⁴⁶ This puts in matter-of-fact terms the same two capital offenses of blasphemy and sabbath violation that frame the debate in Mark's controversy section: 2:1-12 and 3:1-6. The editorial hand of Mark is often seen in both of those texts.⁴⁷ The relationship between Mark and John on this issue may be no more than a common tradition derived from the Old Testament: Exodus 31:14 demands death for profaning the Sabbath and Leviticus 24:16 demands death for blaspheming the name of God. In the Mishnah, both are included on the list of those who are to be stoned to death (*Sanhedrin* 7:4).

We must conclude that, as with many other historical issues, the stories in the gospel of John about sabbath day healing seem improbable. The attachment of sabbath day controversy to healing stories in the gospel of John is even more obviously secondary than in the first three gospels. Both Jesus' use of rabbinic argumentation and the editorial comments on the reasons for killing Jesus reflect a setting at the end of the first century.

TRADITION HISTORY AND FORM CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Biblical scholars arrive at the historical likelihood of individual gospel stories about Jesus by locating them within the tradition that developed between the time of Jesus and the written gospels (30-70 C.E.). Any story with its historical core preserved in the oral tradition must be in a form that could have been transmitted "authentically," that is, its very shape preserved its historical core. Therefore, a saying of Jesus located in a controversy story is more likely to be authentic if it is still in a highly

46. Eduard Lohse, "Jesu Worte über den Sabbat," 79-89, in *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche: Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias*, ed. Walther Eltester (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960), 80.

47. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate*, 111, 121; Guelich, *Mark*, 132-33.

oral form—short, pithy, and memorable—such as Jesus would have used.⁴⁸ However, each controversy story itself is more likely reshaped to reflect an actual controversy at the time the story is retold. Scholars who analyze the tradition must then reconstruct the stages in which the pieces of the tradition were transmitted, and locate likely settings in the life of early Christian communities that would have preserved authentic pieces of tradition.

Rudolf Bultmann was the first scholar to attempt a full analysis of the tradition that developed into the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He began his study with healing stories in the form of “Controversy Dialogues.” Mark 3:1-6 is the first text discussed. In Bultmann’s judgment it cannot be reduced to an isolated traditional saying, such as Luke 14:5 and 13:15. He concluded that both the language and content of Mark 3:1-5 suggested that “its formulation took place in the early Palestinian Church.”⁴⁹

When Bultmann analyzed legal sayings in the tradition, he was more willing to see Mark 3:4 as an example of “the brief conflict sayings which express in a parable-like form the attitude of Jesus to Jewish piety.” This is the among “the oldest material” preserved, so that “this is the first time that we have the right to talk of sayings of Jesus, both as to form and content.” These conflict sayings are prime examples of normative “sayings of the Lord [Jesus],” which the early church gathered, reformulated, enlarged, and developed.⁵⁰

The assessment of the authenticity of controversy stories involves a form critical judgment about the likely setting of such stories. They are most likely “imaginary scenes” designed to provide a starting point to address some typical issue, such as the sabbath day. They do not make “a particular report of a particular historical happening,” even though it is “very probable” that Jesus actually healed on the sabbath day. The “typically Rabbinic” shape of the debates reflects a setting in later discussions in the church about its relationship to Judaism.⁵¹

Various scholars have refined this description of the tradition history of these stories.⁵² Most are convinced that the gospel writers found such stories in the traditions they inherited. However, not many would concur with Joseph Fitzmyer’s judgment that any particular one of these stories

48. The most explicit description of the “rules of evidence” scholars use in making historical judgments is in Robert W. Funk, with Mahlon H. Smith, *The Gospel of Mark: Red Letter Edition* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1991), 29-52.

49. Bultmann, *History of Synoptic Tradition*, 12.

50. *Ibid.*, 145, 147.

51. *Ibid.*, 39-41.

52. See, for example, Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, and Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990).

"probably reflects one of the real-life situations of Jesus' own ministry: a cure and debate over the Sabbath" during an early stage in the tradition.⁵³ E. P. Sanders's sentiments seem more to the point: Any assessment of gospel conflict stories regarding the sabbath "ideally requires us to know things which we cannot know, such as precisely what happened and precisely what the circumstances were."⁵⁴ Indeed, all historical reconstruction, "what happened" and under "what circumstances," is based on degrees of probability, not on certainty. But then we must remind ourselves: reconstruction is the historian's most important task.

In reconstructing the tradition history of Mark 3:1-6, the earliest sabbath healing story, and its relation to the controversy section 2:1-3:6, scholars have tended to choose sides between two opposing views of its likely setting. (1) It reflects an internal matter directed against Jewish Christians, such as in Syria in the 60s, who wanted to maintain their Jewish attachment to sabbath day observances; or (2) it is Christian polemic against Pharisaism, such as in Galilee in the 40s, which represented Jewish competition to the young Christian movement.⁵⁵

Dunn rejects that choice in favor of another scenario. He argues that the whole section is prior to the view Paul expresses in Romans 14:5 that "all days are alike." The entire unit found in Mark 2:1-3:6 "was put together for the benefit of communities for whom the obligation of the sabbath was still assumed and the only issue was how it should be observed." Their Jewish Christian self-understanding was at stake as they wrestled to interpret their traditional views of the law, and "to defend themselves from Pharisaic criticism."⁵⁶ Matthew then represents "a more consistently Jewish audience of Christian believers" since he "takes such care to stifle or diminish some of the more radical implications which follow from the Markan form of the tradition."⁵⁷

ASSESSING SABBATH DAY HEALINGS AS "DEEDS" OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The sayings contained in these controversy stories were considered earlier by the Jesus Seminar. The sayings in the stories in Matthew and Luke have already been discussed above; only Matthew 12:11-12//Luke 14:5 received an average vote any higher than black, the color of all the other sayings in these stories.

Occasionally the Jesus Seminar has voted on general statements

53. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (Anchor Bible 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1011, regarding Luke 13:10-17.

54. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 20.

55. For example, Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, 162, 165.

56. Dunn, "Mark 2:1-3:6," 22-25, 28.

57. *Ibid.*, 35.

about Jesus' activity. Several of the statements are related to issues of the law and sabbath observance. Two were decidedly black:

1. Jesus did engage in debates on fine points of the Jewish Law.
2. Jesus did initiate discussion or debates about sabbath observance.

Two were decidedly red:

3. Jesus did engage in activity suggesting little concern for sabbath observance.
4. Jesus' actions involved him in debates about sabbath observance.

These votes suggest a strong sense among the Fellows that on matters regarding the Jewish Law, especially sabbath observance, Jesus' "actions speak louder than words." That is, the gospel stories involving sabbath day matters much more likely reflect the effect of Jesus' "deeds" than of his actual words. A careful consideration of these stories in this phase of the Jesus Seminar would likely support our earlier analysis based on the sayings. Nonetheless, we are considering very different issues now, so the vote on any specific story may not show much confidence in what the story claims to report.

One of the arguments for sabbath day healing as an authentic historical reminiscence is the claim that there are several independent witnesses attesting to sabbath day healings:

1. Mark 3:1-6 // Matthew 12:9-14 // Luke 6:6-11.
2. A possible saying in Q: Matthew 12:11-12 // Luke 14:5.
3. A special source in Luke: Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-4.
4. The Signs Gospel in John: 5:1-16; 9:1-17.

These appear to be four (sets of) stories not directly borrowed from one another, nor derived from the same common source. However, the form and tradition analysis given above suggests it is simplistic to claim these as four "independent" witnesses.

In the stories in John, the sabbath day is obviously secondary, so that it is not even mentioned in the reconstructed Signs Gospel. The two special stories in Luke seem to be variations of the story Luke borrowed from Mark. They are actually told with greater verisimilitude than the story in Mark, that is, they are more "believable" historically, but that does not necessarily make them more "authentic."⁵⁸ The possible "Q" saying is not actually in Q and the saying itself implies only an accusa-

58. Sanders, *Jewish Law*, 20.

tion about sabbath day healing, not a report of such an actual healing.

We are thus left with Mark 3:1-5(6) as the earliest sabbath healing story preserved. Many scholars are willing to acknowledge a core of some sort that preceded Mark. Hultgren proposed a kernel story:

And a man was [in the synagogue] who had a withered hand. And they watched [Jesus] to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, in order that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to harm, to save life or to kill?" [He] said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.⁵⁹

To picture this as a self-contained unit in the tradition raises several questions: If "whether to heal on the sabbath" is at the core, why does the story end without returning to this issue? Does not the motivation attributed to the opponents, "to accuse him," make more sense in the larger context of a narrative gospel, where the "passion story" features opponents who "accuse" Jesus (Mark 15:3, 4)?

At the same time, there is virtual scholarly consensus that this story is the culmination of a collection of controversy stories with a strong interest in sabbath day issues. Such a collection would have had its life setting in a community of Jesus' followers defending certain religious practices as they shaped their self-identity. The primary disagreement among scholars is in identifying the most likely geographical and temporal setting of such a community, somewhere between the early 40s and the early 70s, either in Galilee or elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world.

Finally, any scholarly assessment must compare this material with previous results judged to be historically "authentic" to see how well it coheres ("fits") with the emerging picture of Jesus. Various scholars have noted the theme of newness in the stories collected in 2:1-3:6 and readily find their origin in Jesus.⁶⁰ This would be consistent with our consensus that Jesus had an understanding of living in this world that was distinct from John the Baptist's more apocalyptic view that the end of the world was at hand. Does coherence then require that we find in favor of those very deeds that would be the natural expression of such an understanding? Would not Jesus' critical stance toward his social world include sabbath day activity that was outside the parameters endorsed by the religious authorities of his day? The solid red vote noted above suggests a virtual consensus that Jesus engaged in activity reflecting general disregard, or at least "benign neglect," for sabbath day observance, which got him involved in debates over such issues.

59. Hultgren, *Jesus and His Adversaries*, 82-83.

60. For example, Dunn, "Mark 2.1-3:6," 21.

At the spring 1993 session of the Jesus Seminar votes were taken on a set of general statements regarding Jesus and healing. The votes were strongly in favor of Jesus' role as healer. The red (1-2) and pink votes included:

1. During his lifetime Jesus was considered a healer.
2. From a modern perspective, some people who came to Jesus were actually cured.
3. Jesus was able to effect cures instantaneously.
4. In modern terms, Jesus was actually a "faith healer."
5. Jesus cured people by his words alone.

This consensus results, in part, from the diverse ways in which references to "healing" form an integral part of the early traditions about Jesus.

The stories themselves, however, when considered as reports of actual events, have a similarity to stories already well known in the culture. As a result, strong red and pink votes were recorded for these two statements about the sources ("generative models") of the actual stories:

6. The Old Testament provided generative models for constructing miracle stories involving Jesus.
7. Greco-Roman stories provided generative models for constructing miracle stories involving Jesus.

One set of popular stories, from the Jewish side, was the cycle of "miracles" attributed to the prophets Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament book of Kings (1 Kgs. 17-2 Kgs. 13). Numerous distinctive stories in the gospels have clearly been influenced by these Old Testament stories. Luke has Jesus himself refer to these stories in his opening sermon (4:25-27) and later tells a healing story (7:11-17) in which Jesus revives a widow's son in imitation of Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kgs. 4:32-37). Some scholars suggest that the entire narrative structure of the gospel traditions about Jesus as "miracle worker" is derived from the Elijah-Elisha tradition.⁶¹

Greco-Roman culture of course had many famous stories of healers and miracle workers. But more importantly, it developed a popular literature around telling the "lives" of such people. Prior to the gospels, the Jewish author Philo wrote a popular "Life of Moses," and a century after the gospels, "The Life of Pythagoras" was written, with emphasis on his

61. See, for example, Wolfgang Roth, *Hebrew Gospel: Cracking the Code of Mark* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988), and the bibliography of such works.

miracles and sayings.⁶² The cultural context was thus “ripe” for stories about popular healers and miracle workers.

The strength and consistency of these votes raises one primary final question: To what extent can any of the surviving healing stories be assessed as preserving any historical reminiscence? The consensus on “generative models” (not a single black vote on statements 6-7) suggests that most Fellows hold in “creative tension” two simultaneous understandings: (1) Jesus most likely was involved in activities and incidents such as described in these healing stories, and (2) any given story, by definition, was shaped by earlier models of such stories and thus cannot be treated as a report of a specific incident. Therefore, how we shape the statements we vote on is likely to directly affect how we then vote.

Our purpose here is to vote on the historicity of these various stories as reports of actual incidents. The analysis in this paper can be summarized by the following recommendations.

1. On the historicity of the healing stories in John 5 and 9 as actual sabbath day events: BLACK.
2. On the historicity of the sabbath healing stories in Luke 13 and 14 as actual occasions when Jesus defended his healing activity: BLACK.
3. On the historicity of Mark 3:1-6 as an actual occasion when Jesus healed someone’s crippled hand, on what happened to be a sabbath day, and some conflict resulted: GRAY.

Even though no particular story in the gospels seems to warrant more than a gray vote regarding its historicity as a reliable report of an actual event, that is not a vote against all sabbath day healings.

On either of the following general statements I would recommend: PINK.

4. On at least one occasion that happened to be a sabbath day Jesus healed someone’s non-life-threatening condition.
5. On at least one occasion that happened to be a sabbath day Jesus faced a confrontation after healing someone’s non-life-threatening condition.

62. For summaries of these “lives,” see Moses Hadas and Morton Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 101-258.

However, to add "in a synagogue" to either statement would reduce it to no more than gray.

If Jesus was indeed a "faith healer," and was not himself an active Pharisee, then it is plausible that one or more healings took place on a sabbath day, or possibly even in a synagogue. But "double jeopardy" healings, both on a sabbath day and in a synagogue, would certainly have been rare. The fondness for telling those stories as conflict stories later in the tradition makes the historian all the more skeptical about their veracity as reports of actual incidents. The historian may well have to conclude: I know Jesus probably healed some non-life-threatening conditions on the sabbath day, but none of these stories is a reliable report of such an occasion.

* * *

[Editor's note: Following this paper, several scholars suggested that the votes on each of these healing narratives should be gray; given what we know about Jesus, they argued, the particular healing could have happened, but probably did not. Two of several votes regarding healing on the sabbath resulted in the following tabulations:

1. On the historicity of Mark 3:1-6:

	Scholars	Associates
Red	0	0
Pink	3	2
Gray	16	5
Black	6	6

2. "On at least one occasion that happened to be a sabbath day Jesus faced a confrontation after healing someone's non-life-threatening condition."

	Scholars	Associates
Red	2	2
Pink	18	3
Gray	4	6
Black	1	2

The issue of the historicity of the narratives on the healings of Jesus is continued in the following paper by M. Barnes Tatum.]