

# THE SABBATH CONTROVERSY AND THE CHRISTOLOGICAL AUTHORITY OF JESUS An Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 12:1-8

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**Abstract:** Matthew's gospel emphasizes the hostility between Jesus and his most vocal opponents, the Pharisees. The Sabbath controversy of Matt. 12:1-8 is a case study on the debate over who has the authority and priority in interpretive practice, wherein Jesus combats the Pharisaic "hedging" of the Law through oral tradition. An analysis of the structure of the narrative helps discern Matthew's careful presentation of Jesus as one who possesses Christological authority. Through a series of seven doublets, the Matthean Jesus masterfully intertwines the situations of his disciples, King David's men, and the temple priests to expose the shortcomings of his interlocutors.

The Gospel of Matthew<sup>1</sup> is the most Jewish of the canonical gospels, chronicling the life and teaching of "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham,"<sup>2</sup> with an emphasis on his fulfillment of prophecy and the Law. The book is structured around five major discourse sections,<sup>3</sup> in and around which Matthew routinely incorporates a special interest in the hostility between Jesus and his most vigorous opponents, the Pharisees.<sup>4</sup> In particular, Jesus bemoaned the Pharisaic "hedging" of the Law in the form of oral tradition, which was especially copious surrounding Sabbath-keeping. One ancient tractate admitted that "the [rabbinic] laws of the Sabbath...are like mountains hanging by a string, for they have little Scripture for many laws" (*m. Hagiga* 1:8). Matthew's first mention of the Sabbath comes in

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<sup>1</sup> Authorship is not within the purview of this paper, and I will proceed under the presumption that Matthew the tax-collector-turned-apostle, is the author. Cf. 9:1, 10:3, et al.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:1b. English Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

<sup>3</sup> They are: [1] 5:17–7:29 (sermon on the mount), [2] ch.10 (mission of the Twelve), [3] ch.13 (parables), [4] ch.18 (Christian relationships), and [5] 24:1–25:46 (fall of Jerusalem / second coming). Each concludes with the formula "when Jesus had finished these sayings."

<sup>4</sup> It comes as no surprise that Matthew, a former tax-collector, would want to emphasize Jesus's rejection of the Pharisees, who seem to have practically coined the slur "tax collectors and sinners" to reference the drudge of first century Palestinian culture.

the context of a controversy between the two parties as presented in 12:1-8, and his edition of the triple-tradition pericope is the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup> A brief, emendation-critical consideration of Matthew's use of Mark as a source follows the composition-critical component of each section.<sup>6</sup>

### Contextual Considerations

Matthew 10 contains the second of five speech sections in the book, and records Jesus calling, empowering, and sending out the Twelve. The entire discourse is peppered with warnings and exhortations that signal a hostile response from the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Despite their miraculous signs, there was a likelihood that the apostles would not be received or listened to. They were being sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves, with an expectation of being dragged, flogged, persecuted, hated, and delivered over to death. They would have to be ready to flee and willing to endure. The apostles were being called upon to overcome fear, bring truth to light, and acknowledge Jesus before men, all while anticipating a cross and a sword rather than peace. But Jesus was not calling his followers to anything he himself was unwilling to undergo, and Matthew proceeds to show Jesus's own example of righteous character in the midst of rejection in chapters 11 and 12. "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" (10:24-25).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. parallel accounts at Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 350, points out that since Matthew normally abbreviates Mark's narratives, the fact that Matthew's edition is longer indicates his additions in 12:1-8 to be highly noteworthy. With Keener, this paper presumes Markan priority.

Matthew 11 and 12 are centered upon the concept of rejection.<sup>7</sup> In 11:1-6 there is the potential for John the Baptist to be offended by Jesus, in 11:7-19 the crowds have accused Jesus of being a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners, and in 11:20-24 Jesus denounces the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum because of their obstinance. Despite the prevailing rejection, Matthew 11 ends with a prayer for and a plea to the religiously burdened, that they might accept Jesus's offer of rest.

The rejection motif will continue on the other side of the Sabbath grain-plucking pericope, as Jesus is again accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath in 12:9-14; this time for having healed a man in the synagogue. Neither Matthew nor the other evangelists record a verbal response from the Pharisees, only that as a result they "went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (12:14). Unfazed, Jesus continues on about his mission of healing and justice, before the narrative comes full circle as the Pharisees charge that the power of Beelzebul is at work in Jesus's ministry (12:24; as foreshadowed in 10:25). Jesus emphasizes that the careless words of rejection being spouted by the Pharisees are the fruit of their evil hearts (12:33-37). They shallowly claim to desire a sign, but the only thing left for them to witness is the sign of the prophet Jonah, i.e., Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Near the end of this rejection motif, Matthew includes the statement of Jesus characterizing those who accept him: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (12:50).

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<sup>7</sup> For support of the suggestion that Matthew 11 and 12 form a chiasm with 12:1-14 at the center, see John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 480.

## The Narrative Setting (12:1)<sup>8</sup>

The introductory *At that time* is not a marker of precise chronology, but serves to tie the pericope to the preceding context, which began with the same phrase at 11:25.<sup>9</sup> On the heels of offering rest in the form of an easy yoke of light burden, Matthew continues with a narrative that is exemplary of the overarching rejection motif by way of Jesus's authoritative interpretation of the true meaning of Sabbath rest.<sup>10</sup> The setting of the scene is presented as Jesus and his disciples passing *through the grainfields on the Sabbath*.<sup>11</sup> 'Sabbath' occurs in 12:1,2,5,8,10,11, and 12, thus linking this pericope together internally and tying it thematically to the ensuing encounter. That work was not allowed on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11) was unanimous, but the questions of what constituted work and who had the authority to determine those rules were open to scrutiny.

The pericope is structured around seven important doublets that serve to tightly link the section together, and emphasize for Matthew's Jesus the comparisons he is attempting to bring out in response to Pharisaic criticism.<sup>12</sup> The first two of the seven doublets are initiated

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<sup>8</sup> This structural outline for Matthew 12:1-8 is adapted from Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, 33a (Dallas, Tx: Word Books, 1993), 327-8.

<sup>9</sup> John Mark Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1-14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1984): 80. This phrase is used three times in Matthew – 11:25, 12:1, and 14:1 – never in Mark or Luke, and is thus a literary device utilized by Matthew to tie pericopes together. BDAG categorizes all three occurrences under the definition "a period characterized by some aspect of special crisis" (καῖρός, 498).

<sup>10</sup> For support of the authenticity of early conflict narratives between Jesus and the Pharisees, and by extension the historicity of the content of this pericope, see Keener, 351-3. *Contra* E. P. Sanders, "Jesus and the Constraint of Law," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 5, no. 17 (January 1983): 20.

<sup>11</sup> That footpaths crossed through fields in ancient times is also brought out in Matt. 13:4. None of the gospel accounts mention a concern for the fact that the disciples are traveling on the Sabbath, and therefore it is safe to conclude that they were within the traditional Sabbath day's journey allowance. The issue at hand is specifically the sanctity of the Sabbath.

<sup>12</sup> Hagner, 328, emphasizes the structural doublets, but only lists four of these.

in v.1: ***His disciples were hungry, and they began...to eat.*** The reader must wait until v.3 (hungry) and v.4 (eat) for the pairings to be completed. The action that will soon become the source of consternation is that ***they began to pluck heads of grain.***

*Redactions:* Matthew departed from Mark's order back in 9:17 (//Mark 2:22), rearranging and adding material in order to provide a more robust introduction to this particular rejection by the Pharisees.<sup>13</sup> He picks the Markan flow (//Mark 2:23) back up here in 12:1. The introductory Ἐν ἐκείνῳ τῷ καιρῷ is unique to Matthew,<sup>14</sup> and further evidence that it is a device he incorporates to connect this episode back to the restful yoke of 11:25-30. Matthew routinely changes Mark's conjunction καὶ to δὲ throughout his entire gospel, including here in v.1 (//Mark 2:23), v.2 (//Mark 2:24), and v.3 (//Mark 2:25). An emendation-critical perspective confirms that Matthew's use of doublets is intentional, highlighting the association between the present circumstance and familiar analogies from the past. Matthew alone includes ἐπείνασαν and καὶ ἐσθίειν, both of which serve to tie the situation of Jesus and his apostles to that of David and his men (who were also ἐπείνασεν and began φαγεῖν in vv.3-4). These were also important inclusions in the likely event that Matthew's audience was

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<sup>13</sup> Boris Repschinski, *The Controversy Stories in the Gospel of Matthew: Their Redaction, Form and Relevance for the Relationship Between the Matthean Community and Formative Judaism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000) 92-4, categorizes Matthew's interpolation as "highly christological in nature," and summarizes: Miracles stories evoke reactive attention (ch.9); The apostles are empowered by Jesus, and their proclamation will likewise be responded to by their hearers (ch.10); John the Baptist, the crowds, and Galilean cities are further examples of those who have opportunity to accept or reject Jesus (ch.11).

<sup>14</sup> All Greek text is taken from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed., ed. Institute for New Testament Textual Research Münster/Westfalen, under the direction of Holger Strutwolf (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 33.

still observing Sabbath (i.e., the disciples did not *wantonly* disregard the holy day, but observed it according to Jesus's merciful interpretation).<sup>15</sup>

### The Criticizing Question of the Pharisees (12:2)

***But when the Pharisees saw it*** introduces their second direct confrontation with Jesus in Matthew. Prior to this narrative section, the Pharisees were cast in a poor light in 3:7 (John called them a brood of vipers) and 5:20 (for Jesus, true righteousness is that which exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees), and had failed in their initial attempt to condemn Jesus based on his table fellowship practices in 9:11-12.<sup>16</sup> That they personally witnessed Jesus and the disciples walking benignly in a Galilean field on a Sabbath indicates that they were keeping a close eye on him in hopes of catching him in error (cf. their “testing” him in 16:1, 19:3, and 22:18).

***[The Pharisees] said to him, ‘look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.’*** The third of seven doublets is opened here in v.2 with “not lawful” (to be completed in v.4 with the account of David, cf. 12:12 where Sabbath healing *is* lawful). Harvesting was explicitly disallowed in Exodus 34:21, but the tedious rabbinic oral tradition later recorded in m. Shabbat 7:2 detailed 39 “generative categories of acts of labor prohibited on the Sabbath.”<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy 23:25 provided a legal contrast between hand plucking and

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<sup>15</sup> John Mark Hicks, “The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1-14,” *Restoration Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1984): 81. Cf. Repschinski, 104-5. The only other occurrences of ‘Sabbath’ in Matthew (24:20 and 28:1) further hint at the idea that his Jewish Christian audience was still observing the Sabbath.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed consideration of Jesus's interactions with the Pharisees in Matthew, see D. Rod Doyle, “A Concern of the Evangelist: Pharisees in Matthew 12,” *Australian Biblical Review* 34 (October 1986): 17-9.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 300, who suggests a total of four potential infractions: plucking, threshing (from Luke), winnowing, and food preparation.

sickle wielding, and though no mention of Sabbath is made there, it seems reasonable to conclude the distinction that allowed one to take from a neighbor's crop is whether one was casually eating or laboriously harvesting. Only the strictest of investigators would have classified the present action as labor.<sup>18</sup> But the traditional interpretation of the Pharisees went far beyond the intention of Torah,<sup>19</sup> giving them reason to excoriate Jesus. The disciples were not violating the Law, and so "the text is not antinomian polemic. Rather, it intends to be an attack upon a perceived casuistic interpretation of God's will and word."<sup>20</sup>

*Redactions.* Matthew alone notes that the Pharisees made their accusation based on ἰδόντες Jesus, which emphasizes their hostile watchfulness, and also ties this interaction to the similar one in 9:11, where the Pharisees accused Jesus based on what they ἰδόντες.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Mark 2:24 simply has the third person plural verb ποιῶσιν, Matthew adds οἱ μαθηταί σου in another effort to firm up the analogy between Jesus's disciples and David's men (οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ in v.3 and τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ in v.4). To highlight the hostile nature of the

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<sup>18</sup> I witnessed a modern example of this practice as a missionary in the Republic of Vanuatu. It was culturally inappropriate for Christians to "work" on Sundays, but as Christians walked home from church along footpaths through the coconut plantations of their neighbors, they would routinely pick up a coconut seedling and split it open to access the *navara* (solid, edible center) for a snack. The practice was acceptable because it was recognized that such was not labor, in spite of the fact that the villagers would return to those same plantations the following day and perform the same act as they harvested copra, a coconut cash crop.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus wrote that "the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws" (*The Wars of the Jews* 2.162), and those "which are supposed to excel others in the accurate knowledge of the laws of their country" (*Life of Flavius Josephus* 191).

<sup>20</sup> William David Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Matthew VII-XVIII*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 306. Cf. Keener, 350, who titles the 12:1-14 pericopes "Conflicting Approaches to Scripture." *Contra* Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, 22 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 196, who interprets the pericope to communicate the fulfillment of the Fourth Commandment such that it was no longer to be observed literally; and Yong Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 174.

<sup>21</sup> Nolland, 481.

interaction, Matthew omits Mark's interrogative τί, thereby turning the question (“*why* are they doing...?”) into an accusation (“they *are* doing...”).

#### Jesus's Haggadic Illustration: David (12:3-4)

Jesus actively engages the accusation, using it as an opportunity to highlight the error of the Pharisees by way of two illustrations. It is important to note that what ***He said to them*** is taken from historical narrative and is therefore rabbinically haggadic, i.e., a matter of religious importance *not* taken directly from the Law.<sup>22</sup> Both of Jesus's Old Testament allusions are introduced by the mildly derogatory ***Have you not read...?***<sup>23</sup> which is the fourth doublet. The use of “read” indicates that Jesus desires to emphasize Scripture over and against the Pharisee's reliance upon oral tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Under consideration is ***what David did when he [and those who were with him were] hungry***. The appeal to David is not surprising, as Matthew links him to Jesus seventeen times in his gospel.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, Jesus analogizes ***how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests***. At once, the “hungry,” the “eat,” and the “not lawful” doublets

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<sup>22</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: University of London Athlone Press, 1956), 67. He later clarifies “[Haggadah] might serve to inculcate moral lessons, general religious truths, wisdom; they might also serve to illustrate and corroborate a halakha. But they could not form its primary source,” 69. Hermeneuticians from the Churches of Christ would likely associate haggadah with biblical “examples” and halakha with specific “commands.”

<sup>23</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 458 notes that this is a formula for “a polemical or argumentative quotation from the OT (cf. 19:4; 21:16,42; 22:31); it suggests that what Jesus is about to say should have been obvious to anyone familiar with the OT text, though in fact in all these cases there is a considerable element of creativity about the way Jesus applies the familiar text.” Cf. “If you had known...” of v.5.

<sup>24</sup> Blomberg, 196. Cf. Option 5 below.

<sup>25</sup> “David” appears only seven times in Mark, thirteen in Luke, and two in John.



are closed, which serve to clearly tie together Jesus and the disciples to David and his men by way of both action and accusation. The fifth doublet “priests” is subtly opened at the end of this first analogy.<sup>26</sup> The narrative is relayed from 1 Sam. 21:1-6, though the original record mentions neither David’s company nor their hunger explicitly. The fact that Jesus emends the story to include both supports the idea that he is calling upon this story to emphasize its parallelism with the situation at hand. Jesus also modifies the original by adding that David εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ, a highly scandalous notion for emphasis-sake and apparent foreshadowing of the priests in the temple in his subsequent illustration.

Davies and Allison note four similarities between Jesus/disciples and David/men: [1] the righteous (appear to) break a commandment, [2] as a result of hunger, [3] Jesus is a descendant of King David, and [4] the possibility that both acts took place on the Sabbath (i.e., the day the bread of the Presence was replaced afresh).<sup>27</sup> They then enumerate eight different scholarly proposals regarding the connection being made:<sup>28</sup> [1] Higher good (e.g. human need) takes precedence over lesser good (e.g. ceremonial law), [2] The rabbis widely accepted Sabbath breach in life-and-death situations, and should have recognized that the disciples could not be delayed in their mission of salvation, [3] David took a priestly prerogative and so may Jesus, [4] The urgency of Jesus’s eschatological mission permitted a suspension of law (à la “I must work while it is day”), [5] Jesus is attacking oral tradition

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<sup>26</sup> France, 460, notes the prevalence of “temple” for Matthew’s Jesus: his perceived negative attitude toward the temple is the central symbol of his challenge of the Jewish status quo (21:23-27); his words about the temple play a central role at his trial (26:60-61) and on the cross (27:40); and the temple’s destruction would be for Jesus a symbol of the final end of the old order (24:1-35).

<sup>27</sup> Davies and Allison, 308.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 310-1.

insomuch as it contradicts written Torah (i.e., David was not condemned in Scripture, and so a tradition that condemned the disciples for acting similarly was out of sync), [6] David and the disciples were priests and could therefore legally profane the Sabbath, [7] One divine demand may overrule another, or [8] Christologically, if David could trespass Torah with impunity, so too the Messiah.<sup>29</sup> Options 2 (too vague), 3 (anemic), 4 (Matthew's Jesus thinks too highly of the Law to promote its suspension, cf. 5:1-19), and 6 (Jesus does not seem to desire special treatment, but rather proper interpretation) may be discarded. Option 1 is reasonable, but dangerous as humans are ultimately ill-equipped to subjectively determine when such precedence may be employed (and Matthew's omission of Mark's "having need" indicates this was not in view). Therefore, some combination of options 5, 7, and 8 is anticipated,<sup>30</sup> but a conclusion is deferred until the full pericope is given consideration.

*Redactions:* Matthew has emended Mark in three notable ways in vv.3-4. He dropped the idea that David's men were "in need," presumably to spotlight ἐπείνασεν and because he recognized that the disciples were not in as dire a situation as David and his men were when they fled for their lives, and such would have worked against the parallelism being created. Thus Matthew's Jesus appeals to authority rather than need.<sup>31</sup> Matthew changes Mark's third-person *singular* verb ("he ate") to *plural* ("they ate") to reinforce the parallelism between the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 310-1. Cf. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 181, who suggests that the rabbis absolved David of guilt through an appeal to (life-threatening) hunger and that Jesus uses their own logic to defend his disciples.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 440, fn 5.

<sup>31</sup> France, 457.

followers of David and the disciples of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> Matthew omits ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθὰρ ἀρχιερέως to avoid confusion,<sup>33</sup> correct a mistake,<sup>34</sup> or follow his proclivity to omit less familiar names.<sup>35</sup>

#### Jesus's Halakhic Illustration: Priests (12:5)

Technically speaking, haggadic arguments such as that in vv.3-4 “could not be used to justify the abrogation of a law.”<sup>36</sup> The Jewishness of the Matthean audience would have required a halakhic illustration to support the haggadic, so he adds evidence. *Or have you not read...?* completes the doublet opened in v.3 with the David analogy, thus stacking the two analogies together for rabbinic weightiness. This second appeal is a reference to Num. 28:9-10, and so carries the specification of being *in the Law* (i.e., halakhic). Specifically, Jesus calls the Pharisees to consider *how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless*. Note that the “priests” doublet is closed, a source of tying the two analogies together, and both the sixth (“temple”) and the final (“guiltless”) doublets are opened in anticipation of applying the analogy directly to Jesus and the disciples.

Specifically, the temple is in the authoritative category of Jesus and David, with the priests in

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 26 gives the plural reading a {C}, and there is a significant textual debate associated with the verb's number. Cf. Repschinski, 97 fn.18.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the Markan Jesus intended to communicate that Abiathar authored (“in the account of” as a translation of ἐπι; cf. Tim Lanigan, “David and the Bread of the Presence,” *Africanus Journal* 11, no. 2 (November 2019): 13) this section of 1 Samuel, but Matthew was concerned that there might be some confusion and omitted due to lack of relevance.

<sup>34</sup> Some conclude Mark was simply in error, as Abiathar's father, Ahimelech was the high priest who dealt with David at Nob, e.g., Davies and Allison, 309, and Repschinski, 97. There was definitely some degree of confusion between the two names as 1 Sam. 22:20 has Abiathar the son of Ahimelech, and 2 Sam. 8:17 has Ahimelech the son of Abiathar.

<sup>35</sup> Luz, 179, fn 9 (e.g., Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46//Matt. 29:30).

<sup>36</sup> Dan Cohn-Sherbok, “An Analysis of Jesus' Arguments Concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1, no. 2 (March 1979): 33.

line with the disciples and David's men. The analogy is effective because it serves as clear evidence from the Law of a merciful, light-burden interpretive posture that both Jesus and his accusers agreed upon in the case of the priests in the temple.

*Redactions:* Matthew's most obvious alteration to the Markan pericope is his insertion of vv.5-7. Most scholars recognize that, though the haggadic argument from 1 Samuel 21 was sufficient for Mark's (and Luke's) community, Matthew's Jewish Christian community would have anticipated a halakhic argument in response to the Pharisees' halakhic accusation.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Matthew includes Jesus's proof from τῷ νόμῳ to bolster his rabbinic defense of the disciples.<sup>38</sup>

#### Something Greater than the Temple (12:6)

The ***I tell you*** is a favorite Matthean Jesus phrase, and is particularly reminiscent of the antitheses of Matt. 5:21-48 ("you have heard...but I say to you"),<sup>39</sup> all of which point to Jesus's interpretive authority. With ***something greater than the temple is here***, the "temple" doublet is closed, securing a connection between the present circumstance and the temple in which the guiltless priests work. There is some debate as to the proper referent of "something greater" because of the Greek comparative's neuter gender. Based on the λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν

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<sup>37</sup> Principally Cohn-Sherbok, 31-41, who contends that *both* of Jesus's arguments would have been taken as rabbinically invalid due to the first's haggadic nature, and ultimately because of the fundamental dissimilarity in both instances. He suggests that the Pharisees were hostile towards Jesus (12:14) precisely because of his gross misuse of rabbinic reasoning. Cf. Yang, 174,180; and France, 456. While Davies/Allison (308,313) and Hicks (85-6) concur with Cohn-Sherbok on the rabbinic invalidity of Jesus's *haggadic* argument, understanding such to be the impetus for Matthew attaching the *second* (halakhic) argument, they find the argument from Num. 28:9-10 to be sufficient according to rabbinic standards. Hicks, 87, argues in favor of fundamental similarity (*contra* Cohn-Sherbok) between the disciples and the priests based on their commission as recorded in Matthew 10, i.e., they were now functioning officially in service of the kingdom.

<sup>38</sup> Repschinski, 96, who sees Matthew taking the Pharisaic accusation more seriously than Mark.

<sup>39</sup> Jesus uses the λέγω [δὲ] ὑμῖν phrase 59 times in Matthew, and only 11 and 39 in Mark and Luke, respectively. Ibid., 99 fn.75.

introduction, the “Lord of the Sabbath” statement to come in v.8, and similar terminology later in vv.41-42 (something [neuter] greater than Jonah/Solomon), a Christological interpretation is preferred.<sup>40</sup> Should the neuter gender of the antecedent be pressed, one can envision a reference to Jesus’s body (σῶμα, cf. 26:61) or perhaps his gospel (εὐαγγέλιον).<sup>41</sup> Through the use of a *qal wahomer* (lit. “from the light to the weighty”) argument:<sup>42</sup> since the temple was greater than the Sabbath, and Jesus was greater than the temple... Jesus was therefore [much] greater than the Sabbath.

#### The Failure to Understand the Law (12:7)

The contrary-to-fact condition, *And if you had known what this means*, signals an additional argument that is in line with the two “have you not read” analogies. This formulaic introduction to the Old Testament quotation is similar yet distinct from its predecessor in Matt. 9:13, where Jesus adjured the Pharisees to “go and learn what this means.” Apparently, they had not done so. Hosea 6:6 is quoted, *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice*. Hicks understands the reference here to function as a “proper principle by which to judge what is lawful and not lawful on the Sabbath,” and considers it the key to understanding the previous two analogies.<sup>43</sup> Had the Pharisees been in touch with the heart of the Law they claimed to

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<sup>40</sup> So Davies & Allison, 314; France, 460-1; and Nolland, 484, who notes that the later manuscripts which replace the neuter μείζον with the masculine μείζων indicate the early interpretation that Jesus was in view (479, fn.f).

<sup>41</sup> *Contra* Luz, 181-2, who makes a strong appeal for the neuter ἔλεος of v.7 to be the referent, but such an interpretation implies that mercy was not “here” previously, whereas God’s desire for mercy was at least as ancient as the prophet Hosea.

<sup>42</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 452-3. Cf. Matt. 6:25-26 and 10:29-30. *Contra* Cohn-Sherbock, 38-9; and Yang, 179-80, who continually find Jesus’s rabbinical skill to be lacking.

<sup>43</sup> Hicks, 82-3. He thus concludes that Jesus’s Davidic analogy “revolves around the idea that human need (mercy) supersedes ceremonial law (sacrifice),” 84.

love, Jesus concludes *you would not have condemned the guiltless*. The seventh and final doublet (“guiltless”) is closed here, again showing that the disciples are analogous to the priests in their innocence. The disciples, like David’s men and the priests, were guiltless because they were operating under the *hesed* of covenant faithfulness.<sup>44</sup> With this reference, Matthew’s Jesus has shown the ignorance of the Pharisees in relation to Law, to historical narrative, and to the prophets – a powerful indictment indeed.<sup>45</sup>

*Redactions.* The Hos. 6:6 citation is unique to Matthew, who includes it twice (9:13 and here). The only other time the noun ἔλεος appears in Matthew is during another controversy with the Pharisees (23:23).<sup>46</sup> Apparently, Matthew had pegged what the Pharisees were lacking.

#### The Authority of the Son of Man (12:8)

The pericope is closed with a summarizing editorial statement, *For the son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*,<sup>47</sup> which lends support to the christological interpretation of the μείζων of v.6. There is debate as to the significance of Jesus’s use of the ‘son of Man’ moniker: whether it is to be understood benignly as ‘human’ or is a special reference to the prophesied king of Daniel 7:13-14. The latter is preferred in the sense that “Jesus’s self-claim was veiled

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin J. Ribbens, “Whose ‘Mercy’? What ‘Sacrifice’?: A Proposed Reading of Matthew’s Hosea 6:6 Quotations,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 28, no. 3 (2018): 386-95. Cf. Psalm 52 title “when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul and said to him, ‘David has come to the house of Ahimelech,’” wherein David twice appeals to the *hesed* of God (vv.1,8).

<sup>45</sup> Keener, 357, who admittedly goes too far in concluding that “Jesus has appealed to all three sections of the Old Testament.” Technically speaking, Samuel and Hosea were both part of the *Nevi'im* section of the *Tanakh*, meaning Jesus did not here appeal to *Ketuvim*.

<sup>46</sup> David Hill, “On the Use and Meaning of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew’s Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 24, no. 1 (October 1977): 110. Cf. his section on the comparison of Greek *eleos* to Hebrew *hesed*, 116-9.

<sup>47</sup> Nolland, 485, understands the phrase to have been originally editorialized by Mark and thus incorporated by Matthew. Cf. Davies & Allison, 316).

enough to prevent accusations of blasphemy – especially since his opponents would not expect him actually to claim what he was claiming – but obvious enough to enrage them.”<sup>48</sup>

*Redactions.* Matthew’s omission of Mark 2:27 (“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”) may be seen as his effort to reduce the potential to interpret “man” and “Son of man” as interchangeable,<sup>49</sup> or because the universal Markan phrase was not directly pertinent to Matthew’s interest in showing Jesus’s interpretative authority.<sup>50</sup> Matthew changes Mark’s ὅστε to γάρ to emphasize the statement’s summarizing nature, i.e., “from what is reported in this account, you may conclude, dear reader, that Jesus exercises authority as Lord over the question of God’s intention for the Sabbath.”<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

In his 12:1-8 pericope, Matthew effectively presents a Jewish-Christian case study on the important debate over who has the authority and priority in interpretive practice.<sup>52</sup> The Pharisees and their successors relied heavily upon oral tradition, which Jesus characterized as a heavy and burdensome yoke. Filled with mercy and compassion, Jesus embodied a better interpretation and application of Jewish Law, particularly as it pertained to Sabbath observance, and was firmly inline with King David and temple priests. Jesus’s disciples had

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<sup>48</sup> Keener, 356.

<sup>49</sup> Repschinski, 105-6; and France, 462.

<sup>50</sup> Hicks, 88, fn.36; and Hagner, 327.

<sup>51</sup> Nolland, 485.

<sup>52</sup> F. Scott Spencer, “Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew’s Jesus.” *Interpretation* 64, no. 4 (October 2010): 377-8, lists four hermeneutical principles from the Matthean Jesus’ interpretation of Scripture as recorded in Mat 12:1-8 and 19:1-9, and demarcates Jesus’ “yoke” as: [1] intertextual, i.e., appealed to law and prophets, not mere prooftexting; [2] principled, i.e., relied heavily upon the foundational character (mercy) and work (creation) of God; [3] accommodating, e.g., allows for merciful eating practices while maintaining the law of Sabbath rest; and [4] authoritative, i.e., “Lord of the Sabbath” and supreme interpreter of Scripture.

not transgressed the Law, but had merely trespassed beyond the “fence around the Law”<sup>53</sup> that had been erected as a hedge of safety.

Both composition-critical and emendation-critical approaches to the text are valuable, as they supplement each other to underscore how Matthew presents the narrative and dialogue, structured around seven doublets: hungry, eat, not lawful, not read, priests, temple, and guiltless. The Matthean Jesus masterfully intertwines the situations of his disciples, David’s men, and the temple priests in such a way as to expose the inconsistencies of his interlocutors. The Pharisees were mistaken because they had not read well the *historical* account of David and his men, the *Law* concerning priestly activity on the Sabbath, nor the *prophet* Hosea’s emphasis on mercy.<sup>54</sup> Succinctly, Jesus retorts, “with your heavy interpretation (vv.1-2), even David and the priests would have been condemned (vv.3-5)... and besides, I uniquely have the Christological preeminence (v.6), mercy (v.7), and authority (v.8) to make these types of interpretive decisions.”

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<sup>53</sup> France, 456.

<sup>54</sup> Repschinski, 101.



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