
Being Fair to the Pharisees: The Sabbath Praxis of the Pharisees from a Jewish Latin-American Perspective

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The Pharisees have attracted their fair share of scholarly attention in recent times.¹ These new quests, however, have yielded little new information about the Pharisees, save for a few insights about their practices gleaned from Second Temple and rabbinic sources.² Joseph Sievers's assessment, pronounced over two decades ago, still stands: "We know considerably less about the Pharisees than an earlier generation 'knew.'"³ Our limited understanding stems in part from the nature of the extant sources. By and large, the relevant materials derive from *non-Pharisaic* documents. Additionally, they are mostly biased against the Pharisees. Paul is a peculiar exception to this rule, but he shares little about his (former?) Pharisaic background.⁴ Josephus claims that he had rubbed shoulders with the Pharisees during his youth, but the Jewish priest did not identify with the Pharisees, whom he criticizes on different occasions.⁵ Some of the documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls blame the Pharisees for observing the Torah too *leniently*. Ironically, the Gospel of Matthew condemns the Pharisees for imposing Torah requirements too *stringently* (Matt 23:4).⁶ The First Gospel mixes its denunciation of the Pharisees with some of the most colorful epithets. The Pharisees are, among other things, hypocrites, children of hell, blind guides, fools, and a brood of vipers (Matt 23:14–33).

Assessing Matthew's (mis)treatment of the Pharisees would be a purely academic affair were it not for the common (mis) association shared by many Christians and Jews between Pharisaic

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and rabbinic Judaism. From a historical perspective, it is tenuous to posit that the rabbis of the Talmud were the religious successors of the Pharisees. The sages named in the Talmud rarely identify as Pharisees, while a variety of non-Pharisaic Jews numbered among the rabbinic ranks.⁷ Nevertheless, this common misperception persists. More importantly, the anti-Pharisaic polemics recorded in the New Testament, not least in Matthew, has fundamentally shaped Christian judgments of Judaism and its practitioners, who are equated with the Pharisees, the supposedly hypocritical promoters of burdensome, legalistic traditions that Jesus so vehemently opposed.

Aware of the dangers of this type of anti-Jewish discourse, New Testament scholars have in recent decades underscored Jesus' Jewish identity. Rather than set Jesus against Judaism, a new tendency affirms Jesus' ongoing commitment to Jewish practice.⁸ Interestingly, the Gospel of Matthew has lent primary support to this endeavor. Matthew, for example, is the only Gospel that contains the categorical declaration that Jesus did not come to abolish the Torah, not even its smallest commandments (5:17–20). Today, many scholars accordingly assume that Jesus only differed with the Pharisees over *how* (rather than whether) to observe the

1. Joseph Sievers and Amy-Jill Levine, eds., *The Pharisees* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021); Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, eds., *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

2. Vered Noam, "Pharisaic Halakah as Emerging from 4QMMT," 55–79 and Yair Furstenberg, "The Shared Image of Pharisaic Law in the Gospels and Rabbinic Tradition," 199–219 in *The Pharisees*, eds. Sievers and Levine.

3. Joseph Sievers, "Who Were the Pharisees?" in *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Loren L. Johns (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 138.

4. Acts 23:6 raises questions about Paul's Pharisaic background since he still declares himself to be a Pharisee after joining the Jesus movement (cf. Acts 15:5; Phil 3:5).

5. Steve Mason, "Josephus's Pharisees," 80–111 in *The Pharisees*, eds. Sievers and Levine.

6. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume IV: Law and Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 439.

7. Günter Stemberger, "The Pharisees and the Rabbis: How Much Continuity?" in *The Pharisees*, eds. Sievers and Levine.

8. Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

What is generally missing in New Testament scholarship from across all aisles is any serious attempt to appreciate Pharisaic praxis *on its own terms*. Few have considered seeing the Pharisees from the eyes of a Pharisee.

Torah in its totality.⁹ To minimize controversy, some specialists have even alleged that Jesus only took issue with the practices of certain Jewish “extremists” (e.g., Essenes), that his approach to Torah observance aligned closely with the perspective of Hillel, who has often been identified with the Pharisees.¹⁰ This irenic position, however, minimizes potential differences between Jesus and the Pharisees and fails to appreciate their opposing views. Indeed, the Pharisees probably had their own (good) reasons for disputing with Jesus and his followers over how they kept the Torah, including the Sabbath, which is the focus of this investigation.

Other scholars, while recognizing disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees, nevertheless perpetuate negative caricatures about Judaism. Thus one exegete in the *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano* claims regarding the Sabbath controversies in Matthew that “Jesus liberated the Sabbath from the burdens and restrictions that the rabbinic tradition had imposed upon it and that had distorted the reason why it had been instituted (cf. Deut 5:12–15).”¹¹ According to this commentator, rabbinic and Pharisaic practice are one and the same, and contrast sharply with Jesus’ understanding of the Sabbath, which of course reflects its true meaning: “there is a rejection of rabbinic halakhah, but this rejection has a positive aim, since Jesus assigns to the sabbatical rest its place as it corresponds to the plan of creation (cf. Exod 20:8–11).”¹²

By no means is this kind of treatment of Pharisaic and/or rabbinic (and therefore Jewish) tradition exclusive to New Testament scholarship from the Latin American world. It derives, in fact, from Western sources.¹³ However, what is generally missing

in New Testament scholarship from across all aisles is any serious attempt to appreciate Pharisaic praxis *on its own terms*. Few have considered seeing the Pharisees from the eyes of a Pharisee. Obviously, the Pharisees would not have nodded in agreement with Matthew that they were hypocrites who were leading people to hell by promoting their understanding of Torah practice (Matt 23:15). Undoubtedly, the Pharisees responded to Matthew with their own counterarguments. However, neither Matthew nor any other New Testament writer ever offers the Pharisees the opportunity to present their case. Imagine if public opinion about the Democratic party in the U.S. was based solely on Republican charges (or vice versa).

If we wish to grant the Pharisees a fair hearing, we must summon our “halakhic imagination.” This will require discipline and exercise, the flexing of an underused muscle in New Testament studies, halakhic analysis. To most New Testament readers, “halakhah” is a foreign word. It does not appear anywhere in the Bible; it does not deal with theological matters of primary concern for most Christians (e.g., Christology or soteriology). Halakhah, which is common to rabbinic parlance, is a term that helps explicate discussions about Torah observance that were central to Matthew’s Jewish world. Jews both before and after Matthew’s time have concerned themselves primarily with how to put the Torah into practice through the proper observance of its commandments. The Hebrew noun “halakhah” derives from the verb *halakh*, “to walk.” It expresses the Jewish preoccupation with implementing proper conduct, *walking* according to (rather than “believing” in) the Way through the concrete fulfillment of teachings divinely ordained in the Torah: “Teach them the laws and instructions, and make known to them *the way* in which they are to *walk*” (Exod 18:20).¹⁴

Halakhic *imagination* is necessary for reconstructing Pharisaic praxis due to the nature of our sources (fragmentary, biased, distorted). Here I will focus specifically on re-envisioning the Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees. I embark furthermore on this imaginary trip from a “Jewish Latin-American” perspective. This marks the very beginnings of an excursion into a much wider project that involves exploring questions of potential interest for Jewish and Latin American communities alike (and various combinations of the two), both in Latin America and the U.S. Matters of common interest include among others: praxis,¹⁵

9. Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts*, WUNT 2.355 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

10. David Flusser, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 39–40, 65. It is unclear though whether the School of Hillel (or Shammai) was *Pharisaic*.

11. My translation of Armando J. Levoratti, “Evangelio según san Mateo,” in *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano: Nuevo Testamento*, eds. Armando J. Levoratti, Elsa Tamez, and Pablo Richard (Navarra: Verbo Divino, 2003), 337.

12. Translation of Levoratti, “Evangelio según san Mateo,” 338.

13. Virtually all of the works cited for the commentary on Matthew in the *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano* originate from the northern hemisphere (English, French, German, and Spanish

publications produced in North America or Europe).

14. Translation mine (emphasis added).

15. I do not use this term in a technical sense here although I take note of the following caution in Norman Solomon, “Economics and Liberation: Can the Theology of Liberation Decide Economic Questions?” in *Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation: An Agenda for Dialogue*, ed. Otto Maduro (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 126: “Many have alleged a parallel in the emphasis on praxis, which appears at first sight to be akin to our traditional Jewish emphasis on *halaka* (law, practice) rather than theology.... However, any such link should be interpreted with caution.... The most that can be safely claimed is that liberation theologians share with Jews an emphasis on the concrete expression of faith.”

liberation,¹⁶ migration,¹⁷ and diaspora.¹⁸ The hyphen in “Latin-American” signals a personal desire to engage with scholarship stemming from the “*comunidad*” in the U.S. *as well as* Latin America.¹⁹ This global ambition originates from personal and local factors.²⁰ Born in Brazil, I spent six formative years of my youth in French Guiana (which in many ways is closer culturally to the French Caribbean than South America) and studied theology in Argentina. However, I have spent the majority of my life in the Midwest, the heart of the U.S. I recognize therefore that my perspective is Latino *and* American, a mixture of the south and north.

Reimagining the Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees

In order to reimagine the Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees, we must first recall the scriptural basis for its observance. The Sabbath was established at creation (Gen 2:1–3), although no explicit command to observe its sanctity is given until the emergence of Israel. At Sinai, the people of Israel receive the commandment to keep the Sabbath (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:13–15). The Mosaic Torah, furthermore, establishes a direct link between the sanctity of the Sabbath and Israel’s own holiness. Sabbath observance is a sign of the covenant established between Israel and its God (Exod 31:15–17).

“Work” or “labor” (Hebrew: *melakhah*) is prohibited on the Sabbath day (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:13–15). The basis for this prohibition derives from God’s own example during creation: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day” (Exod 20:11).²¹ The Hebrew verb for “rest” (Hebrew: *nuah*) conveys a sense of repose, ease, and tranquility. Freed from the exertion of work, humans and even other creatures can enter into a state of rest (Hebrew noun: *menuhah*) that permits refreshment: “Six days you shall do

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your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest so that your ox and your donkey may have relief [*yanuah*] and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed [*vayinafash*]” (Exod 23:12). According to Exod 31:17, even God “was refreshed” (*vayinafash*) from resting on the seventh day. Jewish Scripture and tradition, however, do not define Sabbatical rest as a mere means for resuming weekly labor. The Sabbath commemorates creation and liberation (Exod 20:11; Deut 5:15). Interestingly, the Hebrew noun *nefesh*, which derives from the verb *nuah*, can mean several things, including breath, soul, person—and life. The Sabbath is a celebration of life itself.²²

The Jewish Scriptures never define “work” in a comprehensive way although some examples are offered: plowing and harvesting (Exod 34:21), carrying burdens (Jer 17:19–27; Neh 13:19), buying, selling, and transporting goods (Neh 10:32; 13:16; cf. Isa 58:13), and treading wine presses (Neh 13:15). “Work” does not only encompass physically intense labor. The Mosaic Torah forbids kindling fire on the Sabbath, not an exhausting activity per se (Exod 35:3). Work therefore is not restricted to demanding chores or lucrative endeavors but also includes *creative* acts. According to Gen 2:1–3, God did not “rest” on the Sabbath, exhausted as it were after a hard week at the office. God, rather, *ceased* (*shavat*) from “work” (*melakhah*) performed through mere utterance. The Sabbath, accordingly, is a day of rest *and* cessation, a time when humankind (as represented by Israel) not only refrains from toiling the ground but also from *altering* creation. As the late Adin Steinsaltz put it, “The key element in Shabbat observance is a kind of *passivity*: refraining from ‘work.’”²³ The “work” in question, though, is not measured solely by “the degree of effort involved, or whether the action receives monetary compensation, but rather whether it results in the appearance of something *new* in the physical world.”²⁴ From this vantage point, any kind of kindling, even with the mere strike of a match, can be viewed as work, since it results in the creation of a new physical reality.

16. Liberation could also be discussed under the rubric of “restoration.” See Isaac W. Oliver, *Luke’s Jewish Eschatology: The National Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

17. Efraín Agosto and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Latinx, the Bible, and Migration* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018).

18. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

19. Osvaldo D. Vena, “*El Sur También Existe*: A Proposal for Dialogue between Latin American and Latino/a Hermeneutics,” in *Latinola Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 297–319. On “*comunidad*” as a scholarly undertaking of solidarity, see Edwin David Aponte and Miguel A. De La Torre, *Introducing Latinx Theologies*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2020), xiii.

20. For an overview of Latin American and Latinx biblical scholarship, see Eleuterio R. Ruiz, ed., *80 Años de exégesis en América Latina: Actas del Congreso Internacional de Estudios Bíblicos organizado con ocasión del 80º aniversario de Revista Bíblica*, Suplementos a la *Revista Bíblica* 7 (Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2021).

21. Unless otherwise noted, biblical translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

22. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Noonday Press, 1997), 14.

23. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, xx. Emphasis added.

24. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, xx. Emphasis added.

According to Philo, this passive mode of being on the Sabbath involves all of creation: “there is no shoot, branch, not even a leaf that one may cut, or a fruit that one may pluck” (*On Moses* 2:22). The Jewish philosopher from Alexandria refers not to mere theory but to a practice attested in other ancient Jewish sources. According to the Damascus Document, only produce that was “spoiling in the field” could be eaten on the Sabbath (X, 22–23). Some Jews even objected to eating fallen fruit because of the uncertainty of whether it had fallen *before* the Sabbath.²⁵

Thus, Jews were to take a pause from the human drive to control and consume nature, leaving creation still and untilled. Interestingly, Philo ties this stative posture to another central theme of Sabbath praxis, liberation: “all are dismissed on that day and have access to freedom [*eleutheria*]” (*On Moses* 2:22). In its Deuteronomic formulation, the Decalogue links Sabbath observance with the exodus from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5:16), an event of foundational significance for Jewish tradition and Latin American liberation theology.²⁶ The Sabbath pause enables liberation from enslavement to all forms of work, whether coerced (labor) or creative (“work”). Even foreigners and slaves (among Israel), those, in Latin American terms, most implicated *en la lucha*, the struggle for daily bread, must partake of this Sabbatical rest. Discipline, however, is required to enjoy fully the blessings of the Sabbath, a moment in time that rabbinic tradition conceives as a foretaste of the world to come.²⁷ The Sabbath observer must desist from all working and fully *trust* in God’s provisions. The temptation to suspend this trust and resume one’s daily pursuits, struggles, and worries can be tremendous. The children of Israel erred on this front when they went out in search of manna on the Sabbath instead of trusting that the double portion God provided on the sixth day would suffice (Exod 16:22–30). To guarantee that the Sabbatical peace remains free from the daily procurements of life, commandments that involve *abstentions* become all the more necessary.²⁸ Hence the command that the Israelites not leave their place on the seventh day: “Each of you stay where you are” (Exod 16:29). To be in the Sabbath moment, regular moving must stop. In fact, even talk of work or other secular matters must be avoided.²⁹

In ancient Judea, foreign invaders took advantage of the opportunity to attack Jews on the Sabbath because of their utmost respect for the sanctity of the day. Rather than take matters into their own hands, many Jews chose to remain in a state of complete

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rest and trust in God on the Sabbath day, even to the point of death.³⁰ During the Maccabean crisis, Mattathias and his allies decided that it was necessary under such extreme circumstances to act in self-defense during the Sabbath: “If we all do as our kindred have done and refuse to fight with the nations *for our lives and for our ordinances*, they will quickly destroy us from the earth.... Let us fight against anyone who comes to attack us on the Sabbath day” (1 Macc 1:40–41; emphasis added). Here are the beginnings of the Jewish rationale that would eventually allow one to *momentarily* suspend the Sabbath *in life-threatening circumstances*. A later rabbinic midrash justified this approach based on Lev 18:5, claiming that one must *live* in order to “live” according to the ordinances of the Torah.³¹ The sanctity of human life trumps the sanctity of the Sabbath. Indeed, according to rabbinic halakhah, one may transgress virtually any commandment in order to save human life. In rabbinic Judaism, this notion, known as *piquah nefesh*, “rescuing life” (cf. Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9), can be applied on the Sabbath even in doubtful circumstances, when there is the slightest fear that an illness may endanger a person’s life.³²

That said, permission was not granted in antiquity to suspend the Sabbath in order to heal *non-life-threatening* conditions. Rabbinic texts single out the concern that forbidden activities such as “grinding” (in order to prepare medication) may be performed on the Sabbath to treat minor ailments, which normally can await treatment once sunset arrives.³³ However, the very attempt to *alter* or change a physical condition, regardless of the means undertaken, may stand behind the ancient Jewish reluctance to treat minor illnesses on the Sabbath. Any endeavor in this area would constitute a rupture from *resting and trusting* in God, which is supposed to characterize the Sabbath day, and a return to the weekly business of worrying and “working.” Hence the rabbinic injunction against pleading or crying out on the Sabbath day for

25. Mishnah, Pesahim 4:8. For a further discussion (and for all matters related to Sabbath halakhah in antiquity), see Lutz Doering’s magnum opus, *Sabbat Sabbathhalacha und –praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum*, TSAJ 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 155–157.

26. Leonardo Boff, “Liberation Theology: A Political Expression of Biblical Faith,” in *Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation*, ed. Maduro, 27.

27. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 57b.

28. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 15: “Indeed, the splendor of the day is expressed in terms of *abstentions*.”

29. Prohibition of such talk is already attested in Second Temple Jewish sources. See Isa 58:13, Jub 50:8; CD 10:17–19.

30. 1 Macc 2:29–38; 2 Macc 5:24–26; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1:209–211. Cf. Jub 50:12.

31. See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 27b.

32. Mishnah, Yoma 8:6.

33. See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 53b.

healing.³⁴ There is a reason why it eventually became customary to recite Psalm 23 on the Sabbath. Form critically, Psalm 23 is a psalm of trust. Repose and faithful trust run throughout its verses. No plea for help. “Faith” rather than “works” is the order of the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath praxis of the Pharisees and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

Although we know little about the Pharisees proper, given the popularity of their traditions among the Jewish people in Israel during the first century, we may safely suppose that they subscribed to many of the basic tenets and trajectories we have traced above from Jewish texts and traditions. Like most Jews, the Pharisees would have upheld the holiness of the Sabbath by ceasing from work in all of its defined aspects (creative and intensive) in commemoration of creation as well as the liberation and sanctification of Israel.

In Matthew, the Pharisees clash with Jesus on the Sabbath because of two matters: his disciples pluck grain and Jesus heals a sick person (12:1–8; 9–14). The Pharisees probably took exception with Jesus’ disciples because they viewed their action as tantamount to “harvesting,” which is forbidden on the Sabbath (Exod 34:21). If we recall Philo’s remarks, the disciples would have also been viewed as disrupting nature itself, which was to be left unaltered as a harmonious expression of the Sabbath rest.

To attenuate the perceived severity of their action, Matthew, in contradistinction to Mark (2:23), underscores the *hunger* of Jesus’ disciples (12:1). At least Jesus’ disciples were not desecrating the holy day willy-nilly, as Mark’s account could insinuate, snacking over grain they carelessly plucked during a Sabbath walk at the local park. Jews, however, who were prepared to forsake their lives rather than desecrate the Sabbath, would have been unimpressed by Matthew’s reference to their hunger. Was the disciples’ hunger so acute that their lives were in jeopardy? Perhaps, this is suggested by Matthew’s reference to *David’s* hunger (12:3), though it remains unclear how Second Temple Jews deciphered the circumstances when David ate the priestly bread from the sanctuary in Nob. Was it on the Sabbath (1 Samuel 21)? Whatever the case, Matthew offers no hint that the lives of Jesus’ disciples were imminently at risk. Matthew’s presentation of the controversy only begs the question: Why hadn’t the disciples procured food *before* the Sabbath or at least asked others for assistance to avoid transgressing its holiness? Is the behavior of Jesus’ disciples not reminiscent of the children of Israel who lost trust in God when they went out on the Sabbath in search of manna?

Jesus continues defending his disciples in Matthew with what seems like a halakhic argument, pointing to the priestly service performed on the Sabbath in the Temple. Indeed, work can be performed under certain circumstances on the Sabbath when the requirement to fulfill another commandment arises. For example, circumcision is occasionally performed on the Sabbath, since

34. Babylonian Talmud, b. Shabbat 12a.

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the Torah requires that Israelite male infants be circumcised on the *eighth* day after birth (cf. John 7:22–23).³⁵ But how does the invocation of priestly work justify plucking grain on the Sabbath? This hardly corresponds to anything priestly. In Matthew, Jesus nevertheless draws attention to “something” (Greek: *ti*) greater than the Temple and immediately proceeds to quoting from Scripture: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6; Matt 12:7).

Presumably, Jesus’ interlocutors are being exhorted to show mercy in the current situation. The disciples are in distress. They are hungry, which is dissonant with the spirit of the Sabbath, a day of blessing (Gen 2:3) and delight (Isa 58:13). We might imagine nonetheless the Pharisees contending that procuring one’s needs through “work” on the Sabbath represented a failure to remain at ease, to trust in divine providence. This is probably why Matthew ends with a statement that exalts Jesus’ authority: “For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:8). The Son of Man is a heavenly, eschatological figure in the Book of Parables (1 Enoch). He even sits on God’s throne (1 Enoch 51:3). Therefore, the title “Son of Man” probably refers to Jesus’ heavenly authority.³⁶ If Jesus boasts such divine authority, then as the lord of the Sabbath, he is entitled to bless whomever he sees fit on this holy day. It is especially the Pharisees’ refusal to recognize Jesus in this way, rather than their Sabbath praxis, that frustrates Matthew.

The other Sabbath incident that provokes the Pharisees occurs in a synagogue where Jesus heals a man with a withered hand (12:9–14). Some contend that Jesus did not perform any work on the Sabbath because he merely spoke to heal the man.³⁷ Based though on what was discussed earlier, the Pharisees may have objected to the *effects* rather than the *means* of Jesus’ activity. They

35. See also the Tannaitic midrash, Mekhilta, Ki Tissa-Shabbeta Parashah 1 (Horovitz-Rabin ed.).

36. See Leslie W. Walck, *The Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and in Matthew* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

37. For a list and critique of scholars who adopt this position, see Lutz Doering, “Much Ado about Nothing? Jesus’ Sabbath Healings and their Halakhic Implications Revisited,” in *Judaistik und neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, eds. Lutz Doering, Hans-Günther Waubke, and Florian Wilk, FRLANT 226 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 217–241.

(and other first-century Jews) would have taken issue with the very attempt to *change* a condition that was *non-life-threatening*.³⁸ The withered arm presented no immediate danger to the man in question. Jesus could have waited a few hours until the Sabbath was over and then performed his healing through whatever means possible.

In his defense, Jesus invokes an assumed practice that has puzzled historians of ancient Judaism: “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt 12:11). The New Revised Standard Version adds the word “only,” but the Greek text contains the word “one” alone. It is not entirely clear then whether Jesus is referring to someone who owns just *one* sheep, who absolutely requires therefore this one sheep to earn a livelihood. Surprisingly, the sole Jewish sources from antiquity that discuss this matter suggest that some Jews would *not* rescue an animal on the Sabbath.³⁹ However, if we seriously take the Gospel of Matthew as a source of information about ancient Jewish custom, then we must reckon with the possibility that it alludes to the praxis of certain Jews, perhaps poor farmers.⁴⁰ Regardless of the matter, Jesus invokes this (supposed) assumption to drive home his point, namely, that is “lawful to do *good* on the Sabbath,” especially on behalf of humans who are far more valuable than sheep (v. 12). Indeed, Matthew could have added in Jesus’ defense that his initiative to do good on the Sabbath corresponded with the divine act of *blessing* the seventh day, of investing this particular day with goodness (Gen 2:3). The problem with this consideration, at least from our hypothetical reconstruction of Pharisaic praxis, is that it would clash with the other equally important dimension to Sabbath keeping, cessation, as God also ceased on the Sabbath day from all of the good work done during the first six days of creation.

Concluding remarks

Matthew records controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees that reflect serious differences over how to observe the Sabbath. Although few today believe that Matthew opposed the Jewish Sabbath, polemics and confessional biases have prevented a fair reassessment of the Pharisees’ own Sabbath praxis. The late Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo fared better than many of his contemporaries, discerning in Matthew a clash between Jesus and the Pharisees over an ethical dilemma: What to do on the Sabbath when the obligation to love God conflicted with the

Matthew could have added in Jesus’ defense that his initiative to do good on the Sabbath corresponded with the divine act of blessing the seventh day, of investing this particular day with goodness (Gen 2:3).

command to love the neighbor?⁴¹ Segundo was right to emphasize that, like Matthew, rabbinic (used by Segundo interchangeably with “Pharisaic”) teaching places the love of God *and* the neighbor above “holocausts and sacrifices.” He was mistaken though to suppose that this rabbinic prioritization could emerge from the Prophets (e.g., 1 Sam 15:22) but not the Mosaic Torah. As we saw, rabbinic exegesis turned to the Torah of Moses (e.g., Lev 18:5) to justify placing human life above the Sabbath (and most commandments).

The problem is that none of Jesus’ interventions on the Sabbath as reported in Matthew (or in any other Gospel) deal with *life-threatening* matters. Matthew specifies that Jesus’ followers plucked grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. But were they starving? Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. Yet Matthew provides no indication that this condition posed an imminent threat to the man’s life. Feeding the hungry and healing the sick do admittedly represent acts of mercy, doing “good” (Matt 12:7, 12), which is consonant with the Sabbath’s *raison d’être*, a day that God “blessed” (Gen 2:3). Nevertheless, we have speculated from a Jewish Latin-American perspective that the Pharisees would have deemed that any effort requiring “work,” however good, trespassed the divine imperative to honor the passive, peaceful mode of Sabbatical cessation, which was instituted at creation (Gen 2:3) and designed to liberate humanity from perpetual procurement and self-reliance. On the Sabbath, Israel (and those who join Israel in the Sabbatical rest) is already free as it were from all worldly preoccupations, harms, and strife. This perspective certainly resonates with Latin American theologies of liberation, which, naturally so, have focused on how Jesus embodies the spirit of the Sabbath through his ministry on behalf of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. My Jewish Latin-American reconstruction, however, seeks to balance this evaluation by also considering the Pharisees’ point of view. Presumably, the Pharisees did not remain aloof from the harsh realities of the imperfed world they inhabited. They knew that the sick and suffering were counted among Israel’s children and humanity at large. They too were struck with hardship and disease. However, the test, indeed, the commandment, in the eyes of the Pharisees (and other first-century Jews) was to remain at ease on

38. Cf. Doering, “Much Ado about Nothing,” 234–235.

39. CD 11:13–14; 4Q265 (4QMisc Rules) 6:5–6. Rabbinic texts allow one to provide the animal with assistance albeit without infringing the Sabbath. See, the Tosefta, Shabbat 14:3 and the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 128b. The evidence definitively rules out previous charges against the Pharisees (and by extension, Jews) of materialism. If anything, the evidence suggests that many Jews were prepared to *forsake their wealth* as an expression of their trust in God and in honor of the Sabbath. *Contra* Juan Mateos and Fernando Camacho, *El Evangelio de Mateo lectura comentada* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1981), 121.

40. Doering, *Schabbat*, 460.

41. Juan Luis Segundo, *El caso Mateo: los comienzos de una ética judeo-cristiana* (Maliaño: Editorial Sal Terrae, 1994), 164–170.

this day *despite the unfavorable circumstances*, to faithfully trust in divine providence. By abiding in the Sabbath rest, they hoped to transcend human worries. The Pharisees would have agreed with the rabbinic dictum: “It is the Sabbath [when one refrains] from crying out, and healing is soon to come.”⁴²

42. Babylonian Talmud, b. Shabbat 12a.