

**Legalism and Liberating Obedience: A Case Study on Sabbath
Observance in the Synoptic Gospels**

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Introduction

Discussions of legalism in the New Testament often center around the letters of Paul. With E. P. Sanders ushering in a “New Perspective on Paul” in 1977,¹ conversations about the legalistic quality of first-century Judaism dominated several corners of Pauline biblical scholarship. However, the Pauline corpus is not the only source of information on emerging Christianity’s views on legalism. In what follows, I wish to suggest that it is worth probing the Synoptic Gospels on the issue of legalism in order to understand what the early Christian communities represented by and behind these texts² might have to contribute to an understanding of how legalism was perceived among the earliest followers of Jesus.

The three-fold Synoptic tradition is rich with evidence for a study of how nascent Christian communities navigated issues of legalism in light of the gospel proclaimed by Jesus. Tracing out each evangelist’s precise views on the topic is well beyond the scope of what can be accomplished here. Thus, in this article, I intend to probe this issue by examining two adjacent pericopae found in all three Synoptic Gospels: the account of Jesus’s disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8/Mark 2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5) and the account of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on a Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8/Mark

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

² Here, I am assuming that these communities differed based on the individual evangelists. However, it is worth noting that the long-held hypothesis that the evangelists were addressing particular community needs rather than a much broader audience has been challenged by Richard Bauckham and others who have asserted that a much more universal audience seems to be intended (see Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking Gospel Audiences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004]). The question of the Gospels’ audiences, however, does not need to be resolved here in order to examine how the different Gospels nonetheless address the topic of Sabbath observance in slightly different ways.

2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5). Through this examination, I will make some initial suggestions about what these pericopae might suggest about the attitudes toward legalism that were developing in the early Christian communities that produced the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Ultimately, I will be arguing that emerging Christianity displayed a diversity of views on the topic of legalism in Sabbath observance and that in this diversity, emerging Christianity was not markedly different from its Jewish roots.

My method here is partly redaction-critical, though it is not limited to such an approach. That is, in what follows, I will be observing the differences among the Synoptic authors of these pericopae making suggestions of what these differences might indicate about the evangelists' motivations, audiences, or purposes. However, my purpose here is not to try to suggest why a given evangelist might approach telling these stories with particular differences. Rather, my larger aim is to consider what these differences, taken together, suggest about how early Christian communities were navigating issues of legalism versus permissiveness on the issue of Sabbath observance.

It should be noted that in taking this approach, I assume Markan priority among the Synoptic Gospels. Many scholarly tomes have already been devoted to exploring the Synoptic Problem and Mark's place within this collection of gospels.³ I do not intend to replicate that work. Rather, for the purposes of the present project, I simply assume Markan priority. However, despite working with this assumption, none of the arguments here strongly depend upon it. Rather, what will emerge is that regardless of the order in which the gospels were composed, they display a remarkable diversity in even recounting the same events. In order to understand this diversity best, it is helpful to

³ See, e.g., Alex Damm, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Synoptic Problem: Clarifying Markan Priority* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); A. Farrer, "On Dispensing with Q," in *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot*, ed. D. E. Nineham (Oxford: Blackwell, 1955), 55-88; Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002); M. D. Goulder, "On Putting Q to the Test," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 218-34; Peter M. Head, *Christology and the Synoptic Problem: An Argument for Markan Priority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Werner Georg Kümmel, "In Support of Markan Priority," in *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal*, eds. Arthur J. Bellinzoni, Joseph B. Tyson, and William O. Walker (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1985), 53-62; B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: MacMillan, 1924).

begin by situating these texts within larger traditions of Sabbath observance in the Second Temple period.

Sabbath Observance in the Second Temple Period

In order to understand most clearly what is at stake in Jesus's teaching and actions in these Synoptic pericopae, they should be situated properly within their ancient context on issues of Sabbath observance. As will be shown, these Synoptic pericopae reveal an attitude toward Sabbath observance that is markedly different than some in antiquity. As a point of contrast, one might consider the Sabbath regulations that are specified in *Jubilees* 50:6-13. This text stipulates death as a punishment for several infractions of Sabbath observance including doing work (50:9), lighting a fire (50:12), catching an animal (50:13), or even just *saying* that one will do something (50:8). If these regulations governed ancient thought on Sabbath observance, it is no wonder that following the healing of the man with the withered hand, Jesus's adversaries begin to plot his destruction (Matt 12:14/Mark 3:6). If *Jubilees* could specify the death penalty for one who merely *vocalizes* an intention to take actions, Jesus's blatant public actions were almost certain to attract attention within some corners of the ancient world.

Flavius Josephus also seems to suggest that strict interpretations of Sabbath observance could be found among the Essenes. He suggests that in addition to following many of the same regulations specified by *Jubilees*, the Essenes took Sabbath observance so far as to discourage defecation on the Sabbath (*War* 2.147). While it is not clear that this was a widespread practice outside of the Essenes (assuming that Josephus is even correct here in identifying this as a real practice), just the existence of such a rumored tradition suggests that strict adherence to Sabbath observance was not unknown among some ancient groups.

Given these precedents, the pericopae about grain-plucking and about the healing of a man's hand on the Sabbath would seem to fit somewhat uneasily with certain ancient traditions around Sabbath observance. However, it is important to observe that these traditions were not the only ones that were active within the Second Temple period. A more permissive approach to Sabbath observance emerges

especially in connection with the decision of Mattathias and his colleagues that is narrated in 1 Maccabees 2:29-41 and repeated by Josephus's account of the same events (*Ant.* 12.272-277). This tradition suggests that the group led by Mattathias adopts a more permissive stance on Sabbath observance that allows for warfare to be conducted on the Sabbath. Following the slaughter of Sabbath-observant Jews who refused to profane the Sabbath by fighting, Mattathias and his company re-interpret Sabbath observance to allow for fighting that would preserve their lives. This suggests that even within a relatively fixed period, a diversity of views on the Sabbath was emerging and co-existing. Francis Borchardt summarizes this diversity well:

[First Maccabees presents] no less than three approaches to Sabbath observance among Judeans. There are those who willingly transgressed the Sabbath and other Judean customs (1:43, 52), most likely including the taboo against warfare. Then there is the group of refugees mentioned above, who prefer to die as martyrs on behalf of the Sabbath (2:37-38). Finally, there is the group surrounding Mattathias, which considers itself observant of the Sabbath, but allows for defensive warfare (2:41). This probably indicates that 1 Maccabees never has in mind a rule that covers all Judeans everywhere. It recognizes that Judeans have various opinions on the matter.⁴

As Borchardt observes, then, even within Second Temple Judaism, a wide diversity of views on Sabbath observance co-existed together. Thus, the more legalistic interpretations represented by *Jubilees* and the Essenes were not the only views in Jesus's background.

Despite the diversity of views on the topic (including those views expressed by Jesus and the evangelists), none of these views seems interested in radically over-turning ancient Jewish beliefs around the sanctity of the Sabbath. Rather, even within the Synoptic traditions, one finds evidence that emerging Christian beliefs were engaging in the existing Jewish practice of considering what right Sabbath observance entailed, even if these Christian answers somewhat differed from some of the more legalistic beliefs on the topic.

Legalism and Sabbath Observance in the Synoptic Gospels

⁴ Francis Borchardt, "Sabbath Observance, Sabbath Innovation: The Hasmoneans and Their Legacy as Interpreters of the Law," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 46 (2015): 168-9.

In order to situate the Synoptic tradition within the larger Second Temple traditions around legalism and Sabbath observance, it is helpful to provide some explanation for the choice of the two pericopae examined here. That is, what do these particular pericopae reveal about emerging Christianity's stance on legalism? As Kent Yinger has observed, "the biblical manuscripts contain no Hebrew or Greek lexeme approximating the sense of the term 'legalism.'"⁵ In other words, understanding what the Synoptic Gospels might have to say about legalism cannot be as simple as performing a word study on a key term. Nonetheless, the term ἔξεστιν may begin to approach a range of meanings that overlap at least in part with the English terms "legal" or "permissible." The term ἔξεστιν, used in the New Testament only in an impersonal form, connotes that which is lawful, permissible, and/or possible. In all three Synoptics, the Greek term ἔξεστιν is most concentrated within two successive pericopae: the account of Jesus's disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8/Mark 2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5) and the account of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand on a Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8/Mark 2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5). The term ἔξεστιν pervades these two pericopae in all of the Synoptics, and in the context of its usage in both of these pericopae, it seems clear that it is dealing primarily with that which is lawful from the perspective of Sabbath observance.

Nonetheless, even beyond the pervasiveness of the term ἔξεστιν in these two pericopae, both pericopae capture something of the essence of what seems to be implied by the English term "legalism" as Jesus challenges his interlocutors to reimagine their approach to Sabbath observance in such a way as to expand the possibilities of what might constitute acceptable behavior for the sake of others. Thus, while an examination of these two pericopae alone cannot fully capture emerging Christianity's views on legalism, they nonetheless provide a close approximation, and they can shed light on how early Christians were engaging the topic of legalism on at least the one pertinent issue of Sabbath observance. With the choice of these pericopae having been explained, we can now turn to an exploration of the pericopae themselves.

⁵ Kent L. Yinger, "Defining Legalism," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 46, no. 1 (2008): 93.

Plucking Grain on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8/Mark 2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5)

In all three Synoptic versions of this pericope, Jesus and his disciples are traveling through a grainfield when his disciples begin to pluck grain. Pharisees, noticing this behavior,

question Jesus about the permissibility of his disciples' actions from the viewpoint of Sabbath observance. Appealing to an episode in which David and his men ate the Bread of the Presence (cf. 1 Samuel 21:1-6), Jesus thus defends his disciples' actions and proclaims the Son of Man as the Lord of the Sabbath.

The Markan version of this pericope and its language in 2:23 is intriguing. Here, the evangelist says, the disciples began to “make a way” (ὁδὸν ποιεῖν).⁶ While a literal reading of this phrase suggests simply that the disciples were traveling along from one geographical location to the next, understanding this phrase in a more metaphorical meaning of trail-blazing may not be too far off the mark. Indeed, their actions and the discussion that they spawn serve to “make way” for the new understanding of Sabbath observance that Jesus will be promoting in what follows in this pericope and the next.

Taken to indicate a greater “way-making,” one might wonder whether there is at least a slight echo in Mark 2:23 of the Gospel's introduction with an announcement about preparing the “way” (ὁδὸν, Mark 1:2-3) of the Lord. Lutz Doering suggests that such a connection may be intentional on a redactional level since the evangelist does understand John as a sort of way-maker for Jesus.⁷ Although, as D. A. Carson observes,⁸ it does not seem likely that the disciples are plucking grain for the express purpose of clearing a path through the field through which Jesus can traverse, they are at least metaphorically

⁶ This phrase is not included in Matthew or Luke's versions of the story.

⁷ Lutz Doering, “Sabbath Laws in the New Testament Gospels,” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. R. Bieringer (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 209.

⁸ D. A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 60-1.

clearing a path for his teachings to follow, much as the evangelist understands John to be doing in the Gospel's introduction.

In trailblazing a new path on issues of Sabbath observance, Mark's Jesus is even more blunt than Matthew's or Luke's when it comes to calling the Pharisees to task for their interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures. Where the Matthean and Lukan versions have a simple negative question ("Have you not read...?", οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε [Matt. 12:3]; οὐδὲ...ἀνέγνωτε [Luke 6:3]), Mark's version of the question is more pointed: "Have you *never* read?" (οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε; Mark 2:25). The effect of this intensified negative is to paint the picture of a Jesus who is flabbergasted that Jewish religious officials are not attending to the very texts that they purport to be using in prosecuting the disciples' actions.

Mark's version of this pericope is made additionally fascinating when it is compared with what the other evangelists do *not* include. First, as the Markan Jesus appeals to Davidic precedent to excuse his disciples' behavior, Jesus indicates not only David's hunger, but his need (ὅτε χρείαν ἔσχεν, 2:25). Matthew and Luke's omission of this appeal to need could suggest that the later communities that they reflect may have been concerned that "need" stated so broadly and undefined could allow for overly liberal interpretations of what constitutes "need." Mark's version does not seem to reflect any such anxiety. This more laissez-faire attitude toward the necessity of Sabbath observance could suggest that the community for which Mark was written was not particularly concerned with legalistic interpretations of Sabbath observance.

Another detail in Mark that is omitted in the other Synoptics is the detail of the high priest in David's time. In all three versions of the pericope, Jesus references the episode in 1 Samuel 21 where David and his companions partook of the Bread of the Presence. Mark incorrectly identifies this episode as occurring under the high priesthood of Abiathar (Mark 2:26), but Matthew and Luke, understandably, leave out this incorrect detail.

Matthew takes the appeal to Hebrew Scriptures a step further. In Matthew 12:5, Jesus points to an additional example of priests' service in the temple as a form of Sabbath work that is regarded innocuously. Jesus concludes this example with a statement that

something greater than the temple is now present (12:6). Such appeals to older texts occur later in Matthew's account as well. Matthew concludes in 12:7 by quoting directly from Hosea 6:6 (LXX): "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν). In including this scriptural citation, Matthew connects what could be construed as illegal Sabbath activities with a permissive view of the law as it is already found among the Hebrew prophets.

Matthew's account also differs from Mark's and Luke's in terms of the Pharisees' opening remarks. Where the Markan and Lukan Pharisees begin with a question ("Why do you/they do what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?," Mark 2:24; Luke 6:2), the Matthean Pharisees make a statement of fact ("Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath," Matt 12:2). This antagonistic statement could suggest that issues of legalistic Sabbath observance escalated in severity in the Matthean community compared to the status of such issues in the Markan or Lukan communities.

These differences in Matthew's account compared to Mark and Luke's could suggest that the community for which Matthew was intended was facing greater opposition in relation to the issue of keeping the law. That is, the Matthean Pharisees' statement (rather than question) could be indicative of challenges to the community's own Sabbath practices. Likewise, the heightened appeals to Old Testament precedent could point to a *Sitz im Leben* of the Matthean community that was at pains to maintain amicable relations in the face of disputes over Sabbath observance. In short, these differences in Matthew could be taken as a whole to suggest that the question of legalistic Sabbath observance was a live one for the community for whom that Gospel was intended.

Having observed some of the differences among the Synoptics in this pericope, one can then ask what conclusions might be drawn from this pericope in terms of how emerging Christians were addressing issues of legalism in relation to Sabbath observance. In short, it appears that while legalism itself may not have been upheld as an ideal, reverence for tradition very well may have been. The appeal to David's men (in all three Synoptics), the explicit citation of Hosea 6:6 (in Matthew), and the emphatic negative question to the Pharisees (in Mark) suggest that any supposed dichotomy of "Judaism=legalistic,

(emerging) Christianity=permissive” should be jettisoned. As Nicholas Ansell bluntly puts it, “To see Jesus as championing freedom over obedience here, thus displacing the sabbath altogether, is going too far!”⁹ The picture of Jesus that emerges throughout this pericope in the Synoptics is one of a Jesus who not only upholds guidelines related to the Sabbath but appeals to scriptural texts that assist in the interpretation of those guidelines. Furthermore, if one assumes Markan priority whereby Mark’s gospel represents an earlier strand of Christianity than that represented by Matthew or Luke, this pericope may also suggest that as the Christian tradition developed, it may have actually become slightly more legalistic in its understanding of what constituted proper Sabbath observance such that increased appeals to scriptural tradition became a way of justifying Sabbath practices.

Healing a Man with a Withered Hand (Matt 12:1-8/Mark 2:23-28/Luke 6:1-5)

Following immediately on the heels of the episode in the grainfield, all three Synoptic Gospels report on Jesus’s actions in healing a man with a withered hand on a Sabbath. As a result of this healing, the Gospels report that Pharisees begin to conspire about what to do in response to Jesus.

Despite the similarity among the Synoptic accounts of this pericope, one of the noticeable differences is in the naming of Jesus’s interlocutors in the pericope. In both Matthew’s and Mark’s account of this pericope, Jesus’s interlocutors go unnamed at the outset of the pericope. Luke, however, makes sure to specify that Jesus’s debate partners are “the scribes and the Pharisees” (Luke 6:7). At the conclusion of the pericope, however, they differ again as Luke indicates an indefinite “they” who discuss what to do about Jesus (Luke 6:11). Matthew, however, specifies that the ones plotting are the Pharisees (Matt 12:14), matching the initial Pharisees specified by Luke and the Pharisees identified by Mark (Mark 3:6). Mark, however, includes another group that neither Matthew nor Luke identifies anywhere in this pericope: the Herodians (Mark 3:6). The inclusion of this political

⁹ Nicholas Ansell, “On (Not) Obeying the Sabbath: Reading Jesus Reading Scripture,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 (2011): 102.

(as opposed to religious) group could suggest that Mark understands Jesus's engagement with issues of Sabbath observance as a socially disruptive event as much as a potentially religiously prohibited one. In any case, the differences in naming Jesus's opponents across the Synoptics could suggest that issues of legalism were not seen as a "Jewish vs. Christian" issue. In other words, the lack of a clear antagonist across all the Synoptics might indicate that questions of legalism were more an issue of intra-Christian debate than of an interreligious one.

Beyond this difference of including the Herodians among the named opponents, Mark's account also differs from Matthew and Luke's in the emotional responses that it attributes to Jesus. Where both Matthew (12:13) and Luke (6:10) merely indicate that Jesus provides instructions for the man to stretch out his hand, Mark includes an emotional catalyst for this instruction: Jesus's anger and grief at their hardness of heart (καὶ περιβλεψάμενος αὐτοὺς μετ' ὀργῆς, συλλυπούμενος ἐπὶ τῇ πωρώσει τῆς καρδίας αὐτῶν; 3:5). Such attribution of emotion to Jesus is rare throughout the Synoptics, and so its inclusion here is notable. This could suggest that for the Markan Jesus, issues of Sabbath observance and the restoration to a full and flourishing life are deeply personal ones that elicit an emotional response.

Luke's account is unique in that it emphasizes how the man with the withered hand stands up. In the course of just one verse, four different verbal forms are used to describe Jesus's instructions and the rising of the man (ἔγειρε καὶ στήθι εἰς τὸ μέσον· καὶ ἀναστὰς ἕστη; Luke 6:8). While it could be argued that the repetition of verbs related to standing is merely for dramatic effect, the use of these verbs elsewhere in the Gospel referring to Jesus's own resurrection (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:6, 7, 34, 46) could indicate that a deeper meaning may be at work. That is, as Luke tells the story, the restoration of this man on a Sabbath may serve as a sort of foreshadowing for the ultimate restoration of Jesus from death to life as he is resurrected.

If Jesus's own resurrection is foreshadowed here, Jesus's supernatural powers are even more explicitly indicated in Luke's version as well. While all the Synoptics report that Jesus's actions are being closely scrutinized, only Luke notes that Jesus actually knows

the thoughts of his interlocutors (Luke 6:8). Thus, in addition to foreshadowing Jesus's powers in resurrection, Luke also explicitly indicates Jesus's powers as a mind-reader. The effect of these changes is, as Doering suggests, to "highlight Jesus' dignity in Luke."¹⁰ That is, Luke's account, more than the other Synoptics, seems to capitalize upon this incident as a way of developing a fuller Christology.

Where Luke is at pains to emphasize Jesus's power and dignity, Matthew is more interested in highlighting the growing tensions around Sabbath regulations that Jesus is provoking. Matthew's indication of the location of the actions described in this pericope is telling. Where both Mark and Luke indicate merely that these events occurred in "the synagogue" (τὴν συναγωγὴν; Mark 3:1; Luke 6:6), Matthew names the location as "their synagogue" (τὴν συναγωγὴν αὐτῶν; Matt 12:9). This small yet important distinction has the effect of painting the Matthean Jesus as distanced from the beliefs and practices of the synagogue.

As in the previous pericope where Matthew's account included additional justification, so too here Matthew's version of the pericope includes Jesus offering an additional heuristic example to make his point. In Matthew 12:11-12, Jesus offers the example of saving a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath and suggests that the life of a human is far more important than that of a sheep. As in the previous pericope, then, the Matthean Jesus engages in the traditional rabbinic rhetorical strategy of making an argument with the *qal wahomer* technique.¹¹ By portraying Jesus as making use of this known rabbinic strategy, Matthew paints the picture of a Jesus who is highly conversant in Jewish law and its interpretation.

However, what could seem like a trivial comparison (i.e., retrieving an animal from a pit) might actually have been a far more common point of argumentation about the proper keeping of Sabbath law. Intriguingly, in a section devoted to explaining various Sabbath regulations, the Damascus Document prohibits a man from delivering (יִלֵּד) an animal (בְּהֵמָה) on the day of the Sabbath. Furthermore, it suggests that should the same fall into a pit or a ditch, it should not be raised (יִקְיֵמָה) on the Sabbath (CD XI 13-14). The appearance of this

¹⁰ Doering, "Sabbath Laws," 237.

¹¹ For a more developed argument on the fundamentally Jewish nature of the Matthean Jesus's debate techniques, see Linda King, "Jesus Argued Like a Jew," *Leaven* 19, no. 2 (Jan. 2011): 1-6.

particular example in the Damascus Document could suggest that the appeal to the raising of a fallen animal had become something of a common thought exercise among ancient communities that were negotiating the strictness with which Sabbath regulations should be kept. If this is the case, it is interesting that Jesus seems to imagine that his audience in the synagogue would have already reached a verdict on this case study that is opposite that of the view expressed in the Damascus Document.

Keeping in mind the differences among the Synoptics in this pericope thus prompts the question of what these differences, taken as a whole, might indicate about early Christian approaches to legalistic Sabbath observance. These differences could suggest that as Christianity begins to emerge and to distinguish itself from its roots in Judaism, it becomes more explicitly interested in debates about the theological nuances of Sabbath observance. That is, the extended example of rescuing a fallen sheep in Matthew and the allusions to Jesus's own resurrection in Luke suggest that for the communities behind those gospels, issues of Sabbath observance were a point of theological, if not apologetic, interest. The more sophisticated theological elements in Matthew and Luke could suggest that emerging Christianity began to approach issues of Sabbath observance from a stringent standpoint that might be described as somewhat legalistic or apologetic in its own antagonism toward legalism.

The differences among the Synoptics in this pericope further point to a diversity of views in emerging Christianity. In this way, early Christian views were not unlike the later the rabbinic views on Sabbath observance. As Christopher Rowland observes, "It would be wrong to think of rabbinic Sabbath regulations as a unity; difference of opinion was a hallmark of the rabbinic schools."¹² Thus, there is an indication that in Christianity's early days, nascent Christian beliefs around Sabbath observance were actually not markedly different from their rabbinic counterparts in terms of diversity. This suggests that, again, one must caution against seeing early Christianity as offering some sort of liberating freedom as opposed to a strict Jewish law. Such a stark

¹² Christopher Rowland, "A Summary of Sabbath Observance in Judaism at the Beginning of the Christian Era," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation*, ed. D. A. Carson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 47.

dichotomy not only cannot be sustained by historical evidence, but it is, in fact, deeply problematic because of its potential to result in a harmful, anti-Semitic reading of the Gospels.

Conclusions

As the study of just these two Synoptic pericopae indicate, the communities around the evangelists seem to hold differing views about the place of legalism in relation to Sabbath observance. Based on the (admittedly limited) data here, the community around the Gospel of Mark seems to show few qualms over presenting a Jesus who challenges tradition. The Markan Jesus's harshness with religious leaders and provocation of political leaders suggests a sort of reckless abandon when it comes to the question of legalism on Sabbath observance.

In rather stark contrast to Mark's community, the community around the Gospel of Matthew appears to have maintained a concern with connecting Jesus's teachings on Sabbath observance to the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps as a means of paving the way for less strained relations with Jewish communities. It seems that for this community, any move away from legalism came with a concern to justify such a move with scriptural or theological precedent. More than in either Mark or Luke, Matthew's Jesus justifies his actions that flout Sabbath observance by appeal to scriptural or theological precedent. This suggests that at least for Matthew's community, even if legalism was not upheld as a standard, there may have been some anxiety about what might be perceived as Jesus's lax standards.

Finally, the community around the Gospel of Luke seems to display more of an interest in using these episodes about Sabbath observance to explore larger theological questions that shed light on emerging Christian theology. Especially in Luke's account of healing of a man's hand, there is evidence that these controversies concerning Sabbath observance are more important for their potential to reveal Christological insights than for their contributions to serious discussions of Sabbath observance.

Despite the differences that emerge among the Synoptics in these two pericopae, I hope that one of the conclusions that has become

most clear from this examination is that emerging Christianity's interaction with issues of legalism in Sabbath observance did not seem to stem largely from a desire to differentiate from ancient Judaism. This point is quite important, especially given anti-Semitic readings of the New Testament that attempt to paint ancient Judaism as a negative and legalistic endeavor as opposed to the liberating permissiveness of Christianity. This is in line with Ansell's conclusions on the Markan account of the grainfield pericope, which are worth repeating at length:

I would like to propose that Mark 2:27 be understood as doing for the Old Testament sabbath legislation what the command to love God and neighbor does for the law as a whole, which is to summarize and reveal its true depth meaning (see 12:28-34). Thus for all the newness that Jesus' claim brings into history, he is also telling us that the ancient call to 'remember' and 'observe' the sabbath' and 'keep it holy,' as found in Exod 20:8 and Deut 5:12, is less a command than an ongoing *blessing*.... To accept Jesus' re-conception of the sabbath, therefore, is to look for, and encounter, a very different way of approaching Scripture in which new and old, past and the future, come together in the gift and promise of the Word of life.¹³

That is, Jesus, and the movement birthed out of his ministry, can only be rightly understood within the context of the Jewish tradition. Christianity itself emerged from Judaism, and what the evidence from these Synoptic pericopae seems to indicate is that while questions of Sabbath observance may have been live ones, they were not necessarily blatantly antagonistic ones.

Rather, what seems to be developing in nascent Christian thought here is not unlike similar developments in later rabbinic Judaism around questions of how the tradition can be put into practice in a given setting. As Rowland says, "The concern of the rabbis was to make God's will a possibility for their own generation; they did not have the same tendencies toward obscurantism or literalism found in the Sabbath regulations of some conservative groups that took an unrealistic approach."¹⁴ In other words, one might discern nearly parallel tracks within both Jewish and early Christian communities whereby questions of legalism in relation to Sabbath observance were

¹³ Ansell, "On (Not) Obeying the Sabbath," 101. Emphasis original.

¹⁴ Rowland, "A Summary of Sabbath Observance," 53. Doering, too, sees in the Jesus tradition a forerunner to some argumentation about Sabbath observance that is observable in the later rabbinic traditions as well ("Sabbath Laws," 253).

being carefully considered within pluralistic settings that offered several different answers. Thus, the diversity of Second Temple views about Sabbath observance that emerges as early as 1 First Maccabees¹⁵ seems to continue into the Jesus tradition and onward even into the rabbinic tradition. Emerging Christianity, then, is well at home with contemporaneous Jewish beliefs both before and after its time.

To be sure, the sample size of this exploration was small with only two illustrative pericopae being compared across the Synoptic Gospels. Nonetheless, the presence of significant differences among the Synoptics even in these two pericopae suggest a multiplicity of ways in which emerging Christianity navigated issues of legalism. Perhaps, more than anything, the conclusion that most needs to be drawn from this examination is that there was no one way of navigating legalism around issues of Sabbath observance. The differences among the Synoptics in just these two pericopae suggest that early Christian communities took a variety of approaches to issues of legalism. Furthermore, the fact that so much diversity exists in relation to just this one issue (i.e. Sabbath observance) suggests that attitudes regarding practices of the law in other regards may have been even more divergent.

There would have been a host of other issues upon which a debate about legalism might have hinged. For example, although Paul's letters represent an earlier time in the development of Christianity, these letters nonetheless display a prevalent concern over the need for circumcision and proper eating practices in regard to meat sacrificed to idols (e.g. 1 Cor 8; 10:14-23; Rom 14:1—15:6; Gal 5:1-15). It seems unlikely that in the short decades between Paul and the Synoptic evangelists that these other issues would have been wholly resolved.

In short, the diversity noted just on the issue of Sabbath observance suggests that on any of the other prominent theological issues facing early Christians there might have been a similar of diversity of views. Given this diversity, interpreters today should approach the topic of legalism with care, especially care to avoid anti-Semitic readings that paint ancient Judaism as an oppressive, legalistic religion compared to the liberating permissiveness of early

¹⁵ Cf. Borchardt, "Sabbath Observance," 168-9.

Christianity. Rather, as has been shown, early Christians, like their Jewish counterparts, took seriously the question of what obedience entailed and reached a variety of conclusions that might continue to inform diverse Christian views and practices today.