

The Jewish Sabbath as a boundary

For a point of culture, I found this comment on sacred boundaries interesting (See Friedman & Dolansky, p. 132)

Time: the institution of the sabbath is notable in that it takes a twenty-four-hour unit of time and declares it to be holy just as a building or an object can be holy. Violating this boundary of time, just like violating a boundary of space, can result in execution. In our experience, one of the hardest aspects of the Bible for people of recent generations to grasp is this notion of sacred zones. Ritual, zones that are holy or secular, pure or impure, are less common in present religion, especially Western religions, than in the biblical era. Violation of these things is dangerous and frightening in that world.

There is a scary story in Numbers (15: 32-36). A man finds some sticks, which are to die for. He's caught. What should we do? I'm not sure what part of the law they don't understand. Anyway, they check with Moses who checks with God. And, as expected, based on the law written in stone, the man is stoned to death. Friedman & Dolansky use the story in the context of discussing capital punishment.

Enns' Commentary on Jesus' Creative Response

For another perspective, I selected Peter Enns (See chapter 5, location 2517).

AT TIMES JESUS goes out of his way to cross lines that Jewish authority figures dare him to cross—like he's trying to make a point about something. He could back down, but he doesn't. For example, Jesus has this habit of healing people on the Sabbath. Sabbath was a holy day of rest, which meant refraining from any sort of work. One of the issues that Jews debated was what exactly "work" was. What were you actually barred from doing on the Sabbath? How much effort could you exert before you were "working"? By Jesus's day, Jewish culture already had a tradition of drawing some clear boundaries to guide people in keeping the law. Some of Jesus's Sabbath-healing episodes in the Gospels make it clear that he was being watched closely to see whether he would cross the line. If the priests and scribes caught him in the act of healing—of "working"—on the Sabbath, Jesus would open himself up to the charge of law breaking.

Knowing this, Jesus went right ahead and did it anyway. One episode early in Mark's Gospel has Jesus and his disciples walking through a field on the Sabbath, when the disciples begin picking grain. The Pharisees accuse them of doing what is "unlawful," and according to Jewish teaching it was unlawful and everyone knew it—including Jesus. Jesus responds by reminding them of one brief moment in the life of David: when he and his men were hungry, they entered the sanctuary and helped themselves to the sacred bread there. First of all, we have here another example of Jesus's creative handling of his Bible. The scene with David doesn't really fit Jesus's situation. It didn't even happen on the Sabbath. Plus David is escaping King Saul's clutches and grabbing food on the go out of necessity. Jesus and his disciples are just roaming through a field on the Sabbath, and the disciples pluck grain because they are

hungry. Jesus zeroes in on his point at the end of this story in Mark. He says that “sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for sabbath,” which seems to be a way of saying that Sabbath-keeping is not to get in the way of human need, and if it does, the priorities are skewed. This kind of comment puts Jesus in good company. Several Old Testament prophets also chide Israel for putting the rote practice of the law (specifically, animal sacrifices) over the practice of justice and righteousness (doing right by others). But still, picking grain like this is not a matter of justice and righteousness. Something else is going on. Jesus ends this debate this way: “the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.” Now Jesus claims to have some authority about what Sabbath means and what can or can’t be done on it, at least more authority than the legal tradition, which disallowed things like plucking grain. Jesus is walking on the edge. He isn’t obliterating Sabbath, but he is relativizing it. And, you know, if he felt like it, he could have avoided these conflicts altogether by waiting a few hours to pluck grain or maybe just planning ahead with a box lunch to avoid even giving the impression that he was breaking the law. Or, if he wanted to, seeing that he was caught in the act, he could have gone out of his way to make sure his support of Torah was unwavering. But instead, Jesus uses (creatively) another portion of scripture to undermine the idea of absolute Sabbath-keeping, and then claims to have the authority to make that judgment.

Class Discussion

At this point I would like to stop and invite you to share your thoughts. Following are a few questions to get us started.

What do you think of Friedman and Dolansky’s comments on old laws setting sacred boundaries of space and time?

What comments do you have on Enns’s view of Jesus’ teaching about the Sabbath?

How free are we from the shackles of all the Old Testament laws?

How free are Christians to re-interpret Jesus’ guidance in the same way he re-interpreted various laws and scriptures?

How free are Christians from the New Testament teachings of first century Jews like Paul and Peter to make their own rules? Are Christians free to decide how to help people embrace their gifts, solve life problems, and enjoy healthy relationships?

References

Enns, P. (2014). *The bible tells me so: why defending scripture has made us unable to read it*. HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Friedman, R. E. & Dolansky, S. (2011). *The Bible now* (p. 132). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.