

## FLIGHT ON SABBATH AND THE SABBATH IN MATTHEW 24:20

Recently, the Sabbath issue has received much attention from scholars. In his concluding observations on Jesus and the Sabbath in the Gospels, Carson writes,

There is no hard evidence that Jesus Himself ever contravened any written precept of the Torah concerning the Sabbath. Nevertheless, one must not make too much of this observation. One dare not conclude on this basis that Sabbath observance is still mandatory. The same argument would require that we continue to sacrifice in the temple.<sup>1</sup>

How should we, then, understand Matthew 24:20 where Jesus admonished His disciples, “And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath”?<sup>2</sup> Why is it that they should pray that their flight during the Jewish War (AD 66-70) might not be on the Sabbath? Could they have their flight on the Sabbath? What about the continuity of the Sabbath observance? More precisely, is the Matthean Jesus merely foreseeing that about thirty years from the moment He gave His Mount Olivet discourse, His disciples would continue to observe the Sabbath, or something much more than the continuity of Sabbath observance is implied in His admonition, i.e. the flight on the Sabbath would interfere with its sacredness?

It is argued that Christ admonished His disciples to pray that their flight might not be on the Sabbath because of diverse hindrances they would face on that day. These may include: (1) “suspension of services to travelers, and especially inability to purchase supplies,”<sup>3</sup> (2) closed city-gates,<sup>4</sup> (3) “mood psychologically adverse to fleeing,” or “refusal on the part of strict observers to help those in need,”<sup>5</sup> (4) fear of rabbinical restrictions which allowed only a

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in *From Sabbath To Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 84.

<sup>2</sup> All scriptural references, unless otherwise stated, are from the New King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Sabbath-day's journey,<sup>6</sup> which eventually would attract the rage of "fanatical Jews who would become furious at a supposed desecration of the Sabbath."<sup>7</sup>

Some question the authenticity of the phrase "neither on the Sabbath," considering it as a later Jewish-Christian interpolation.<sup>8</sup> Others straightforwardly advance that it is a Matthean

interpolation.<sup>9</sup> But such a view has not remained unchallenged.<sup>10</sup> Hence, Specht affirms that there is "no valid reason for rejecting them as a genuine part of the logion."<sup>11</sup>

Others see that "Sabbath observance remained a live issue" for the Matthean Jewish community.<sup>12</sup> Jesus' statement would accommodate Jewish Christians "crisis of conscience" regarding whether flight is lawful or not on Sabbath.<sup>13</sup> This opinion acknowledges that Matthew 24:20 is a clear indication of Sabbathkeeping at the time of the war, but only for Jewish Christians. If so, Jesus knew the Sabbath "would be abolished, and was abolished before this time; but he says this with respect to the opinion of the Jews, and 'judaizing' Christians, who, taking that day to be sacred, and fleeing on it unlawful, would find a difficulty with themselves, and others, to make their escape."<sup>14</sup>

In reaction to such a position, Bacchiocchi argues that question about Sabbath observance is not in view. In other words, flight on the Sabbath is mentioned merely incidentally, but the point is the permanence of the Sabbath.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>6</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 915.

<sup>7</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1943), 939.

<sup>8</sup> O. Cullman, *Early Christian Worship*, 1966, 10, as quoted by Bacchiocchi, 70.

<sup>9</sup> T. W. Mason, *The Teachings of Jesus: Studies in Its Form and Content*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 327; Herold Weiss, *A Day of Gladness: The Sabbath among the Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2003), 90. For Willoughby C. Allen, *St Matthew*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1912), 256, Matthew adds the phrase as a proof of the "Jewish predilections of the evangelist" and gives Mat 5:18; 10:6,23; 19:19; 23:8,23 as supporting evidences. Donald A. Wagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 698, states that Jesus did not utter these words but Matthew supplied them "as a matter of special concern for his Jewish readers."

<sup>10</sup> Carson, "Jesus and the Sabbath," 84 (fn 107).

<sup>11</sup> Walter F. Specht, "The Sabbath in the New Testament." In *The Sabbath in the Scripture*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 102.

<sup>12</sup> D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 337.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Hagner, 702, goes in the same direction when he says that Sabbath observance "would still have been a **serious matter** for the Jewish-Christian membership of Matthew's church." (emphasis supplied).

<sup>14</sup> Henry P. Davis III, "Matthew 24:20," accessed April 5, 2014, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/matthew-24-20.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "The text really offers no reflection regarding the observance of the Sabbath, since it deals exclusively with the future flight, and the winter and the Sabbath are introduced incidentally only as possible obstacles. The uncertainty is not about the observance of the Sabbath, but rather regarding the arrival of the great 'tribulation'

Specht goes further to indicate Jesus' view of the Sabbath as sacred and His expectation from the Christians to regard it as sacred as late as during the war.<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, Shea concludes that Christians should pray for a flight that would not be on Sabbath "out of respect for their observance of that day."<sup>17</sup>

### The Text

The last week of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem starts with His triumphal entry (Matt 21:1-11), and His cleansing of the temple, His "house" (21:12-13). In His last discourse in the temple He pronounced woes and judgment on those who killed the prophets, "on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth. . . all these things will come upon this generation." (23:31-36). It is in this context that he predicted the desolation of the temple and Jerusalem (23:37-39), which He takes up again in His private eschatological discourse with His disciple on the Mount of Olives.

Among the three Synoptics which relate Jesus prediction on the destruction of Jerusalem (Mat 24:15-22; Mark 13:14-20; 20-24), Luke does not report any admonition from Jesus to pray whatsoever, while Mark is satisfied with Jesus saying, "pray that your flight may not be in winter" (Mark 13:18). Only Matthew has the phrase "or on the Sabbath," making Jesus admonition to read, "pray that your flight may not be in winter (*cheimōnos*)<sup>18</sup> or on the Sabbath (*mēde sabbatō*)" (Mat 24:20). The immediate context (Mat 24:15-22) of the admonition reads:

Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place, (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were

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(Matt. 24:15,21). The fact that the Sabbath is mentioned not polemically but incidentally as an element unfavorable to a flight, implies that Christ did not foresee its substitution with another day of worship, but rather that He took for granted its permanence after His departure." (Bacchiocchi, 70,71).

<sup>16</sup> Specht, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Shea, 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Cheimōn* can mean also bad weather or heavy rainstorms. Harsh condition is implied.

shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

Jesus clearly has in view the Roman war and the destruction of Jerusalem, some thirty years after he originally said it to His disciples.<sup>19</sup> This is indicated by Jesus' statement to the disciples, "Do you not see all these things (*tauta panta*, i.e. buildings of the temple)? Assuredly, I say to you not one stone shall be left here upon another that shall not be thrown down." (24:2). His disciples wanted to know more about the time when that will happen through the question "when will these things (*tauta*) be?" (24:3). Jesus does not immediately answer, but goes on to describe prophecies and events leading up to His coming (24:4-14). Then only in 24:5 does He deal with the question, "when you see the 'abomination of desolation.'"

These disciples would be in the city of Jerusalem (cf. Luke 21:20) and in Judea. When the 'abomination of desolation,' is set up, that should serve as warning sign for them to immediately flee in order to avoid general destruction by the Romans.<sup>20</sup> The use of three verbs in aorist imperative indicate urgent and immediate action: *pheugetōsan* ("let them flee," 24:16), *mē katabatō* ("let him not come down, 24: 17), and *mē epistrepsatō* ("let him not go back," 24:18). Equally noteworthy is the use of the verb in present imperative in 24:20, *proseuchesthe* ("continue to pray"). From the time Jesus warned them about that pending destruction onward, their constant prayer to God should be that the flight should not be on the Sabbath. Such insistence obviously implies something extremely important about the Sabbath.

### **Jewish Views on the Sabbath Observance**

As it has been mentioned above, Jesus' admonition was addressed to His disciples, who would be in Jerusalem or in Judea during Roman war. They must

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<sup>19</sup> Weiss (142), in contrast with the prevailing position, maintains that Matthew wrote his gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem. The date of composition is immaterial to our discussion because it does not affect the fact that Jesus states that the Sabbath would be observed at the time of the war.

Moreover, for Weiss, Matthew has in mind the Sabbath before the Parousia. Weiss (171) states, "according to him, Sabbath observance should not be disrupted by anything, including the troubles that accompany the apocalyptic end of the present age. To that end he hopes that the Parousia will not take place on a Sabbath." Weiss' position has not received much support.

<sup>20</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Hope* (Nairobi, Kenya: East-Central Africal Division Publishing Association, 2013), 17, applies the 'abomination of desolation' to the "idolatrous standards of the Romans" that were "set up in the holy ground, which extended some furlongs outside the city walls."

have been aware of and felt subject in a way or another to the rabbinic rule on what conduct to take in such circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Robert M. Johnston affirms, “no other institution is more important to Judaism than the Sabbath.”<sup>22</sup> That importance demonstrates why the Sabbath has received a particular and extensive treatment probably more than any other aspects of life from Jewish legal experts.<sup>23</sup> But the Jews themselves admit “the rules about the Sabbath . . . are as mountains hanging by a hair, for the teaching of Scripture (thereon) is scanty and the rules many.” (M. *Hag.* 1.8).<sup>24</sup>

Given the multitude of rules on Sabbath,<sup>25</sup> it is no wonder that there is diversity within Judaism, in opinions and practices. Rowlands clarifies: “it would be wrong to think of rabbinic Sabbath regulations as a unity; differences of opinion was a hallmark of the rabbinic school.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, compared with that of the Pharisees, the Essenes observance was stricter.<sup>27</sup> The differing view is also clear from the conflicts between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, which offer different approach to the obedience of the divine commandments.<sup>28</sup>

### Was Flight Allowed on Sabbath Day?

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<sup>21</sup> T. W. Mason, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 295-296 writes that these were an “authoritative code of morals declaring what is the right course of conduct in any given circumstances: and as circumstances may vary indefinitely the tendency is for the code to become more and more complicated, until the determination of what is to be done, or not to be done, becomes the business of experts. . . The business of the lawyers was to construe these precepts, to define their terms and apply them to cases as might be necessary from time to time.”

<sup>22</sup> “The Rabbinic Sabbath,” in *The Sabbath in the Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 71. C. 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 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 54, says, “according to Rabbi the Sabbath commandment is equal to all the commandments of the Torah (j. Ber. 3c),” 54 (fn 3).

<sup>23</sup> This is readily seen in the great amount of space dedicated to the tractates Shabbat and Eruvim in the order of Moed in the Mishnah.

<sup>24</sup> Johnston has written about the Rabbinic Sabbath which has shed much light on how the Jews viewed Sabbath and its observance (see Johnston, 70-91). Johnson made an interesting statement when he says that in spite of Sabbath prohibitions and restrictions, there is arguably the positive side of rabbinic observance: the Sabbath was the “climax of the week, it was approached with increasing expectation and left behind reluctantly.” (Ibid., 84). References are given, for instances, for food, drink, and fresh/special clothing on Sabbath (Taanith 1.6); fasting or mourning on Sabbath was forbidden. As one Rabbi (R. Berechiah) taught the “Sabbath was given solely for enjoyment.” (Pesikta Rabbati 23:9).

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Dictionry of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 538-539, explains this well, “in rabbinic law, each category [of thirty-nine forbidden works on Sabbath] is subject to further expansion through the delineation of derivative varieties of forbidden labors. In some interpretations, this yields as many as 1,521 forbidden activities (Y. *Shabbat* 7:1. Ab-c).”

<sup>26</sup> Rowlands, 48. This diversity has also been acknowledged by Sigal, 120.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Essenes did not allow rescue of animal on Sabbath day (Damascus Document XI.13; cf. b. Shab 128b) which the Pharisees did (Matt 12:11).

<sup>28</sup> Rowlands, 124.

Halakhic instructions on the Sabbath have been derived and circumvented from the OT (Exodus 20:8-11; 16:29; Neh 13:19-20; Isa 58:13; Jer 17:21-22). Exodus 20:8-11 is the fourth commandment that forbids work ( מְלָאכָה ) on Sabbath.<sup>29</sup> Isaiah 58:13 enjoins God's people to not turn away foot from Sabbath or doing one's own pleasure or ways on the Lord's holy day.

Addressing the children of Israel in the wilderness, God says in Exodus 16:29, "Let every man remain in his place (LXX: *oikos*, "house") ; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day." Unlike the Samaritans who strictly interpreted and applied it by never leaving their dwellings on the Sabbath,<sup>30</sup> Jewish legal experts set up the lawful limit of Sabbath day's journey, i.e. 2,000 cubits (Acts 1:12).<sup>31</sup> Yet on Sabbath, the Jews could move more than the Sabbath days' journey.<sup>32</sup>

Nehemiah 13:19-20, "So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath." It is of common opinion that gates of Jerusalem were shut on Sabbath day in the NT times.<sup>33</sup>

Jeremiah 17:21-22, "Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the Sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem; nor carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day, nor do any work, but hallow the Sabbath day, as I commanded your fathers." An example of strict view of the Sabbath to apply this injunction is found in the book of Jubilees:

it is not lawful to do any work thereon which is unseemly, to do thereon their own pleasure, and that they should not prepare thereon

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<sup>29</sup> The biblical word *melakah* that is used here and elsewhere to refer to work does not give any precision of what work it is about. The Mishnah attempts to wrestle with the issue and comes up with a list of thirty nine forbidden works on Sabbath (Shabbat 7.2). The basic list is drawn from the exegesis of Exodus 35 where work on Sabbath and kindling of fire are explicitly mentioned (35:2,3) , but the chapter goes on to describe the construction of the tabernacle. Hence, "all the different activities that must have contributed to the building of the tabernacle must come under the rubric of 'work.'" (Johnston, 78). The number thirty- nine itself is deducted from Deut 25:3, "forty," save one.

These thirty-nine forbidden activities were listed as *abhot melakah* ("fathers of work") in the Mishnah (*Shab. 7*) and their derivatives called *toledot* in the Talmud – for example, a derivative of reaping would be to pick fruit (Geoffrey Wigoder, "Sabbath," *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* [New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1989], 610).

<sup>30</sup> Johnston, 74.

<sup>31</sup> See the tractate *Eruhim* in the Mishnah for the treatment of these limits and how they function.

<sup>32</sup> This is the case, for example, for a man who is forced by a non-Jew (m. Erub 4:1-3); a man returning home as the Sabbath sets may also have asked his son to prepare the *eruv* for him (m. Erub 5:7).

<sup>33</sup> Carson, 74.

anything to be eaten or drink, and that it is not lawful to draw water, or bring in or take out thereon through their gates any burden, which they had not prepared for themselves on the sixth day in their dwellings. And they shall not bring in nor take out from house to house on that day.” (Jubilees 2:29-30). Jubilees 50:8 warns that buying or selling on that day is punishable by death.

According to E. Lohse, as quoted by Shea, the older Halachah of Jubilees 50:12 considers fighting as work and thus prohibits it on Sabbath.<sup>34</sup> The account in 1 Maccabees 2:32-38 reveals that a thousand Jews at the beginning of the Maccabean war died because they allowed themselves to be killed than to defend themselves during Sabbath.<sup>35</sup>

For a Jewish stricter view, whatever work is not related to the temple ritual is forbidden (Matt 12:5).<sup>36</sup> But as Johnston notes, “the Rabbinic laws were in certain significant aspects a relaxation from far stricter Halakah held by earlier Jewish sects.”<sup>37</sup>

It is within this relaxation and in emergency situation that we should consider Jewish view in the NT time with regard to the flight on the Sabbath. Corollary to that situation is self-defense. 1 Maccabees 2:39-41 reveals that after the killing of Jews on Sabbath, the Maccabees resolved to self-defense when attacked on that day:

Now when Mattathias and his friends understood hereof, they mourned for them right sore. And one of them said to another, If we all do as our brethren have done, and fight not for our lives and laws against the heathen, they will now quickly root us out of the earth. At that time therefore they decreed, saying, Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the sabbath day, we will fight against him; neither will we die all, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places.

Josephus informs that at the time of Pompey, the Jews would lift weapons to defend themselves if attacked on Sabbath. He writes, “our law gives us permission then to defend ourselves against those who begin to fight with us and assault us.”<sup>38</sup> But the view has evolved to include attack. Josephus relates the

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<sup>34</sup> Shea, 28.

<sup>35</sup> See Shea, 28, where he mentions the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians on a Sabbath as part of the history of the problem of Jewish military activity on Sabbath.

<sup>36</sup> Obviously it was lawful to circumcise on Sabbath.

<sup>37</sup> Johnston, 74.

<sup>38</sup> *Antiquities* 14.63.

Sabbath attack against the Romans in the beginning of AD 66 war, “without any consideration had of the seventh day rest.”<sup>39</sup>

Such conduct seems to reflect the Pharisaic approach in the first century, which “wrestles with the tension between precepts and a humanitarian outlook of life.”<sup>40</sup> The principle that has been clearly applied here is that when human life is in danger, it is more important to attend to than Sabbath restrictions (Matt 12:8; Mark 2:27).<sup>41</sup> As John Nolland says, that was a “more pragmatic understanding of the demands of an emergency situation.”<sup>42</sup>

We now move to the Jewish position on the flight on Sabbath. Specht states, “even the rabbis recognized that to save one’s life might be regarded as justifying flight on the Sabbath.”<sup>43</sup> And in the words of McIver, “it is clear that the Rabbis taught that at times of deadly peril the law of *pekuah nepesh* took effect. In Rabbinic Judaism there would be no question about fleeing in time of crisis, even on the Sabbath day.”<sup>44</sup> They would have no problem to consider it lawful to flee on Sabbath under such circumstances. To illustrate this, the opinion of several prominent rabbi of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century which says that there are times when one must stay alive and well even to the point of “transgressing” the Sabbath in order to be able to observe many Sabbaths is revealing:

R. Jose the Galilean says, when it says, But my Sabbath you shall keep, the ‘but’ (*’ak*) implies a distinction. There are Sabbaths on which you must rest, and there are Sabbaths on which you should not rest. . . . R. Nathan says, Behold it says, wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations. This implies that we should disregard one Sabbath for the sake of saving the life of a person, so that the person may be able to observe many Sabbaths.”<sup>45</sup>

Another rabbinic source reads:

Our Rabbins teach, that he that is pursued by Gentiles, or by thieves, may profane the sabbath for the sake of saving his life: and so we find of David, when Saul sought to slay him, he fled from him, and escaped. Our Rabbins

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<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.517.

<sup>40</sup> Rowlands, 47.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, healing on Sabbath is forbidden, but provision is made for it to be done if the life of the person is in danger (Yoma 8.6).

<sup>42</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 973.

<sup>43</sup> Specht, 103.

<sup>44</sup> McIver, 253.

<sup>45</sup> Rowland, 50, quoting J. Z. Lauterbach, *Melkita de R. Ishmael Sabb.* 1.

say, that it happened that evil writings (or edicts) came from the government to the great men of Tzipore; and they went, and said to R. Eleazar ben Prata, evil edicts are come to us from the government, what dost thou say? "shall we flee?" and he was afraid to say to them "flee"; but he said to them with a nod, why do you ask me? go and ask Jacob, and Moses, and David; as it is written, of Jacob, (Hosea 12:12 ) "and Jacob fled"; and so of Moses, ( Exodus 2:15) "and Moses fled"; and so of David, (1 Samuel 19:18) "and David fled, and escaped": and he (God) says, (Isaiah 26:20) "come my people, enter into thy chambers."<sup>46</sup>

These statements establish that the Jews could flee on Sabbath to save their life from danger. This in turn indicates that endangered Christians in Jerusalem could also take their flight without any hindrances on Sabbath. But before we embark on the interpretation of Jesus' admonition in Matt 24:20, a presentation of Jesus' and the apostles' view of the Sabbath is in order.

### **Jesus's View on Sabbath in Matthew and the NT**

There is a need to reevaluate Carson's assertion that "it is not legitimate to deduce from this passage (Mat 24:20) that Jesus Himself never envisaged the abandonment of the Sabbath when Jerusalem finally fell."<sup>47</sup> Such an assertion seems to fail to take into consideration Jesus' view on the law, particularly the Sabbath in Matthew (and in the whole gospels).

The majority of opinion forms the consensus that Matthew wrote his gospel among and to Jewish community, and more precisely the Sabbath-observant community.<sup>48</sup> Jesus' view on the Sabbath is inseparably tied up with His view of the law. In Matthew, *nomos* ("law") occurs eight times (5:17,18; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5; 22:36,40; 23:23), referring in general to the five books of Moses. None of these shows that Jesus had a negative view of the law. On the contrary, His statement Matt 5:17 is unambiguous, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."<sup>49</sup> His sermon on the mountain

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<sup>46</sup> Bemidbar Rabba, sect. 23. fol. 231. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Carson, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Robert K. McIver, "The Sabbath In The Gospel Of Matthew: A Paradigm For Understanding The Law In Matthew?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2 (1995), 231.

<sup>49</sup> The expression "Law and prophets" refer to the whole Old Testament, the "Scriptures" (Matt 22:4); Luke 24:27,32). But Jesus specifically mentions laws (*nomoi*) from the Ten Commandments ("Do not murder," 5:21, "Do not commit adultery," 5:27), as well from the other parts of the Pentateuch ("Eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21; "you shall love your neighbor," Lev 19:18).

touching upon the law gives its fuller meaning (5:21,22; 5:27-30; 5:31,32; 5:33-37; 5:38-41; 5:43-47). *Entolē* (“commandment,” “precept”) occurs six times (5:19; 15:3; 19:17; 22:36,38,40). Jesus attests that the fifth commandment, “honor your father and your mother,” and the commandment “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death,” are God’s commandments (Matt 15:3,4). He summons people to keep the commandments (Matt 19:17-18). Paula Fredricksen rightly affirms that during His lifetime, Jesus did not publicly teach against the law.<sup>50</sup>

In line with His view of the law, Jesus customarily observed the Sabbath (Luke 4:16).<sup>51</sup> McIver points out “compared to the other Synoptic Gospels, Matthew is clearly at pains to remove any possible doubt that the Sabbath might not retain its validity for the disciple of Jesus.”<sup>52</sup> Matthew records two of the conflicts on the Sabbath that Jesus had with the Jewish leaders: the disciples plucking heads grains on the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8), followed by the healing of a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the same day (Matt 12:9-14). It is important to notice that in the middle of these two, Jesus Himself declares that He is the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8). It is very clear from these episodes that His conflict with these leaders was not on the validity of the Sabbath,<sup>53</sup> and the issue not whether Sabbath should be observed,<sup>54</sup> but the way they observed it.<sup>55</sup> Hence, He was engaged in internal religious reforms among His people. To do good on Sabbath is, in no way, to abolish it. To do good on Sabbath establishes the Sabbath, and thus, it is lawful (Matt 12:12).

The NT attitude toward the Sabbath is undoubtedly the same as that of Jesus. For Matthew, particularly, Sabbath observance remained important.<sup>56</sup> *Sabbaton* occurs ten times in his gospel to mean Sabbath (Matt 12:1,2,5,8,10,11,12; 24:20; 28:1), once to mean “week” (28:1). Seven of these have to do with the conflict with the religious leaders on Sabbath in Matthew 12.

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<sup>50</sup> Paula Fredricksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 107-108. The same view is expressed by Geza Vermes, *Jesus in the Jewish World* (London: SCM, 2010), 20, when he says that Jesus did not reject the Jewish law.

<sup>51</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 27.

<sup>52</sup> McIver, 231-232.

<sup>53</sup> Fredricksen, 7, unambiguously states that it is “impossible to picture him as one who declared the sabbath commandment obsolete.”

<sup>54</sup> Daniel K. Falk, “Sabbath,” in *The Eerdmans’ Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1176.

<sup>55</sup> Vermes, 20.

<sup>56</sup> David J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 341.

Matthew is the only evangelist to report Jesus' admonition to the disciples to flee during the Roman war. But the Sabbath holds an important place in his mind that in line with Jesus' statement, he too unreservedly concurred for the flight not to take place on that day (24:20). After the crucifixion, Matthew has the women come back to the tomb of Jesus after the Sabbath, obviously implying that those women have been observing the Sabbath (Matt 28:1). Throughout his writings, Matthew does not give any hint or negative remarks about the Sabbath, although some thirty years have elapsed since Jesus' death. Specht summarizes that the Christians at the time Matthew wrote were still observing the Sabbath.<sup>57</sup> If Matthew did not have a high view of the Sabbath, it would be natural for him to be expected to do say the contrary. He lends his support for the Sabbath through his report of these two events (no flight during Roman war and rest during Sabbath at Jesus' death).

In reaction to the opinion that only Jewish Christians continued to observe the Sabbath, Weiss strongly responds,

To argue that generally Gentile Christians did not become observers is, at best, misleading. . . . Greek-speaking diaspora Jews may have been more attached to the temple and the Sabbath, than Palestinian, Aramaic-speaking Jews. Gentile converts to Christianity may have been more attached to the Sabbath than some Jewish Christians. Attachment to the Sabbath was not determined by geographical, linguistic, or ethnic backgrounds."<sup>58</sup>

There is, therefore, no valid ground to assert that "the practice of the Christian community which has freed itself from the Jewish Sabbath, is being supported and vindicated from Scripture."<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, as Weiss concludes, the NT "shows that the Sabbath occupied a prominent position in the early Christian communities."<sup>60</sup>

We are now at a position to interpret Jesus' admonition to His disciples in Matthew 24:20 that they should pray that their flight may not be in winter or on Sabbath day.

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<sup>57</sup> Specht, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Weiss, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Eduard Lohse, "Sabbaton," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 7:22.

<sup>60</sup> Weiss, 177.

## Sabbath in Matthew 24:20

### in Its Historical Setting: An Answered Prayer

It is clear from the cursory reading of Matthew 24:15-22 that the prayer should be done for the “elect’s sake” (v. 22). Josephus gives us the following historical evidence.

Of the retreat of Celsus and his army at the beginning of the war (AD 66), Josephus writes,

had he but at this very time attempted to get within the walls by force, he would have won the city quickly, and the war had been put an end to at once; but Tyrannius Priscus, the camp prefect of the army, and a great number of the officers of the cavalry, had been corrupted by Florus, and diverted him from his attempt and that was the reason that this war lasted so very long.<sup>61</sup>

Michael McGoodwin further clarifies, “Cestius pauses outside Jerusalem, delays attacking, then calls off his men and retreats ignominiously. Jews capture Roman machines and celebrate a victory.”<sup>62</sup> Many Jews fled during the Roman temporary retreat. Josephus tells, “after this calamity had befallen Cestius, many of the most eminent of the Jews fled from the city, as from a ship when it was going to sink.”<sup>63</sup> For the Christians too, that retreat was an answered prayer. Taking heed of Jesus’ instruction, it is beyond doubt that they took this as a sign for their flight and they were effectively able to flee from Jerusalem. Shea notes,

the first phase of this war ended with a Jewish victory, which occurred in the fall of 66. The Romans, however, came back with a vengeance in 67. This interlude provided Christians (and Jews) time to flee as Jesus had instructed them. Moreover, the Roman legions and banners were brought up to the wall of the temple enclosure in this initial phase of the war. The signal was given that it was time to flee, and the Roman retreat provided the opportunity to do so.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> *Jewish War* 2:531-532 .

<sup>62</sup> Michael McGoodwin, “Flavius Josephus: The *Jewish War*,” accessed 16 June 2016, [http://www.mcgoodwin.net/pages/otherbooks/fv\\_jewishwar.html](http://www.mcgoodwin.net/pages/otherbooks/fv_jewishwar.html); also Shea, 33.

<sup>63</sup> *Jewish War* 2.556-258.

<sup>64</sup> Shea, 33.

Their prayer has been literally answered, because they were able to flee and their flight occurred before the winter began and they had sufficient time for the flight so as to not flee on Sabbath.<sup>65</sup>

Of the flight and settlement of the Christians to Pella, Eusebius confirms, “but the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella.”<sup>66</sup> In another occasion, Eusebius says, “for when the city was about to be captured and sacked by the Romans, all the disciples were warned beforehand by an angel to remove from the city, doomed as it was to utter destruction. On migrating from it they settled at Pella, the town already indicated, across the Jordan. It is said to belong to Decapolis.”<sup>67</sup> What does that answered prayer have to do with the continuity of the Sabbath and/or its sacredness?

### Sabbath in Matthew 24:20 and Its Continuity

It is commonly assumed that Matthew wrote to Jewish Christians. We have observed that at the time of the war, Jewish Christians were still observing the Sabbath.<sup>68</sup> “Continuing relevance [of the Sabbath] may therefore be implied,” from Matthew’s gospel, and not the contrary.<sup>69</sup> In this respect, Matthew’s view on the continuity of the Sabbath may be expected both in his particularism and universalism in the Gospel. His gospel is the “most Jewish of all the Gospels,” yet, it is embedded with “multiethnic universalism,” as the gospel commission (Matt 28:18-20) to “all people groups” [*ethnē*], implies.<sup>70</sup> Christ’s universal followers, present and future, do not break away with God’s Law, they follow it. Jesus was in controversy with the Jewish about the Sabbath. He did not question the validity of the biblical Sabbath but the rabbinical Sabbath halakah.

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<sup>65</sup> Shea, 34, refers to F. Parise, *The Book of Calendars* (New York: Facts on File, 1982), 12, for the calendric calculation which points to the Judeans and Jerusalemites’ flight a month or six weeks before the winter rain began .

<sup>66</sup> Eusebius *History of the Church* 3.5.3.

<sup>67</sup> Eusebius *de Mens. et Pond.*, 15. Yang-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew’s Gospel*, JSNT Supplement Series 139 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 236, does not see how the fulfillment of Jesus’ prediction fit with Pella, because Pella was not in the mountains (Matt 24:16). But for Shea (32), Yang has a “very literalistic reading of the text. . . . As a geographical point, one flees through the mountains of the wilderness of Judea to get down to Jericho.”

<sup>68</sup> See further, Sherman E. Johnson, “Matthew,” in *Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1951), 7:547; A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 183.

<sup>69</sup> S. Westerholm, Craig A. Evans, “Sabbath,” *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 1033. This stands true for Matthew 12:1-4 (cf. Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6).

<sup>70</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1997).

### Sacredness of the Sabbath in Matthew 24:20

Neither Jesus, nor his disciples are found guilty of breaking the OT Sabbath law. As Carson honestly admits, “ransack the Torah, you will, it remains difficult to see what law was broken by the disciples. ... The Halakhah of course, has been broken, but it is precisely such legalism that Jesus repeatedly combats.”<sup>71</sup> It is clear that Jesus did not endorse man-made rules (Matt 12:1-7; 15:1-9), and these likely include Sabbath journey.<sup>72</sup> But as we have seen, the Jews made margins to allow for humanitarian reason to be taken into account. Anyway, the *erub*<sup>73</sup> could allow them to go for an extra Sabbath journey, which would bring them beyond the range of Sabbath harassment and danger (m. *Erub* 4:1-3, 7-9; 5:7). Therefore, it does not seem likely that Jesus admonished his disciples to pray that their flight should not be on Sabbath because of the Sabbath journey’s limit.

There is something more than the continuity of Sabbath observance which transpires from this admonition. Jesus admonished them to pray that their flight should not be on Sabbath because he foresees its permanence and re-affirms its sacredness. In other words, flight on the Sabbath interferes with its sacredness and should be avoided as much as possible.

### The Sabbath in Matthew 24:20

We have introduced this study by presenting arguments that are put forward for the disciples to pray that their flight might not be on Sabbath. We will briefly deal with the most significant among them.

(1) Suspension of service to travelers. The vivid description of what is happening and the

urgency of the flight do not allow anyone to have time to grab or purchase supplies on **any** day. There is no time to take anything out of the house (24:17), no time to get cloth back (Matt 24:18), just run with what is on. While working in the field, a man removed, laid aside and put in a secure place his cloak (*himation*, ‘outer garment,’ ‘cloak’) and wore only his tunic (*chitōn*) (cf. Matt 5:40).

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<sup>71</sup> Carson, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Specht, 103.

<sup>73</sup> *Erub* is the law concerning the transportation of objects from one place to another on Sabbath while *erube tehumin* is the combination of parts of two Sabbath-day journeys (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “*Erub*.”).

The flight should not be on Sabbath, not because services are suspended and no purchase of supplies can be made.

(2) Closed-city gates. Proponents of the flight not happening on Sabbath advance the

shutting of the gates on Sabbath as a reason. But they fail to see that shutting of the gate at night is equally applicable. The gates were shut at night (Jos 2:5,7; cf. Rev 21:25).<sup>74</sup> Pregnant women and nursing babies are specifically mentioned to suffer during the war. They will be adversely affected if they have to flee in winter, obviously because of the harsh conditions (Matt 24:19). If it is hard for pregnant women and nursing babies to flee during winter and they will not be able to get out from Jerusalem on Sabbath because the gates were closed, then the same should be equally said about flight at night. First, it will be obviously hard for them and second, they will be prevented from getting out because the gates were shut. It is therefore important to mention that Jesus did not say, "Pray that your flight might not be in winter or on Sabbath or at night." The logical conclusion is drawn: it does not seem likely that Jesus admonished his disciples to pray that their flight should not be on Sabbath because the gates would be shut.

(3) Fear of rabbinical restrictions on Sabbath-day journey. We have seen that rabbinical

laws (*eruv*) allowed Jews to go beyond the restricted Sabbath-day journey. That provision might bring the disciples to a place where they are beyond the danger zone. There is also the principle that to save one's life might be regarded as justifying flight on the Sabbath. In a war situation like this, there might be more blame put on those who stay behind than those who flee. In this regard, fanatical Jews who would become furious in seeing people fleeing on Sabbath would not be able to do much. To be alive, well, and able to observe many more Sabbaths, one may transgress a Sabbath.

These may be reasons, not to flee on Sabbath, but they are more of external hindrances and it appears that they are not the main reason why the disciples should pray that the flight might not be on Sabbath. From the foregoing discussion, three points emerge as far as Jesus' admonition in Matthew 24:20 pertaining to the Sabbath is concerned: (1) Continuity of the Sabbath observance

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<sup>74</sup> See also "Sabbath," accessed 9 June 2014, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12962>.

during the war (2) Disciples' prayer: that they would still be able to keep the Sabbath during the war, and (3) Jesus' consideration of the Sabbath as sacred and binding upon all Christians in the future times.

### **Conclusion**

It is beyond any doubt that the Sabbath continued to be observed in Jerusalem and in Judea during the war. The mere fact that Jesus exhorted his disciples to pray that their flight would not be on Sabbath and Matthew, unlike other Synoptics, confirms that his disciples were a Christian Sabbath-observant community. Neither Matthew, nor Jesus questioned the validity or the sacredness of the Sabbath. His disciples observed it, even at his death, a few decades later, and far beyond. The controversy with the Jewish religious leaders stemmed from the rabbinic legislation versus biblical law on the Sabbath. Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:20 points to the fact that the Sabbath was to be observed during Jewish war and not fleeing on that day is in line with and testifies to its sacredness. The disciples got an answer to their constant prayer: their flight was not on Sabbath.

In Matthew 24:20, Jesus upholds that the Sabbath, during the Roman war and in future times, is and will remain a sacred day of rest and worship. The geographical direction in Jesus' instruction to His disciples regarding the preaching of the gospel further supports the sacredness and observance of the Sabbath that transcend Jewish confines. From only to the lost sheep of Israel to the prohibition to enter Gentiles and Samaritan cities (Matt 10:5,6), the ultimate commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew clearly include "all nations" (Matt 28:19). Such a conclusion rules out the possibility that Jesus abolished the Sabbath and initialized the move to keep Sunday, nor can He be used to support such a move from Sabbath keeping to Sunday keeping. The disciples' custom on Sabbath observance is a strong and irrefutable testimony (Acts 17:2; cf. Luke 4:16).

Matthew 24:20 is not simply about flight on Sabbath. It implies beyond reasonable doubt that Sabbath sacredness and keeping is binding upon all Christians in all ages and spaces.