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Linda King
elbbc@cox.net

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Jesus Argued Like a Jew

LINDA KING

Intentionally or not, Christian scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge the Jewishness of Jesus. To be sure, no one denied Jesus' birthplace in Judea to parents who were Jews. But the observation often stopped there. Recently, however, Christians have begun to reconsider the Jewish pedigree of the gospel message, the Jewish nature of Jesus' thinking and teaching, and the ways he interpreted the Jewish scriptures. For example, the conflict stories of Matthew 12, when viewed through a lens of Jewish rhetoric, yield insights into what Matthew's Jesus may have been saying and how he said it. As a first-century Jew, Jesus thought like a Jew, he read his Bible like a Jew, and he made his arguments like a Jew—which is to say, according to Hillel.

THE SEVEN *MIDDOTH* OF HILLEL

On scene in first-century Palestine was a great Jewish teacher named Hillel,¹ who developed a set of exegetical principles known as the Seven *Middoth* (a plural Hebrew term meaning “rules” in this context) of Hillel.² The earliest list contained seven of these rules;³ however, the list later expanded to thirteen, then thirty-two, and eventually (by the 1900s), six hundred thirteen. As the prevailing rhetorical strategy of the day, these rules would have been familiar to Jesus, his disciples, and his Pharisee interlocutors, as well as to Matthew and his community. While various *middoth* have been identified throughout the New Testament, the *middoth* Jesus employed the most often were *gezerah shawah* and *qal wahomer*. I suggest that in Matthew

1. In the literature, Hillel is occasionally referred to as Rabbi Hillel. See E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in Light of Modern Research* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1991), 130. However, since the title of “Rabbi” is not believed to have been formalized until after the time of Hillel, most modern authorities refer to him simply as Hillel, “the great teacher Hillel,” Hillel the Elder, a sage, or a scribe. See Henry A. Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 116, fn. 123 and 127, and 159, fn. 197. See also David Instone-Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 CE* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), 2.

2. In rabbinic literature, the Seven *Middoth* of Hillel are recorded in three documents, with slight variations: ARNa.37.10, tSanh.7.11, and the Introduction to Sifra.

3. Stated succinctly, the Seven Rules of Hillel are:

1. *Qal wahomer* means “light and heavy” and refers to an inference from minor and major, an argument *a fortiori*.
2. *Gezerah shawah* refers to an inference drawn by analogy, by comparison with a similar situation or similar words or phrases in scripture.
3. *Binyan ‘ab mikathub ‘ehad* refers to building a family from one passage; that is, constructing a general principle inferred from one verse.
4. *Binyan ‘ab mishene ketuvim* refers to building a family from two passages; that is, generalizing from a combination of two scriptural texts.
5. *Kelal upherat* means general and specific; that is, a general principle may be qualified by specifics, and conversely, particular rules may be expanded to generalizations.
6. *Kayoze bo bemaqom ‘aher* (“as appears from another scriptural text”) reasons that a difficulty in one passage may be resolved by comparing it with another text.
7. *Dabar halamed me ‘inyano* declares that a meaning may be established by the context.

12, the author employs these *middoth* to confirm two separate but related truths: Jesus as the ultimate rabbi and interpreter of the law, and the summation of the law in the equation of righteousness with mercy.

The Basic Conflict

In the narrative of Matthew 12, Jesus and his disciples are walking through the grainfields on a Sabbath. The disciples are hungry, so they pick grain and eat. The Pharisees accost Jesus, saying, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (v. 3). Much of the remaining chapter is given to Jesus’ very Jewish responses.

When the Pharisees allege that the disciples’ actions are unlawful, Jesus directly contradicts them, calling his disciples innocent, guiltless. Is Jesus dismissing either the Sabbath or the law? I don’t think so. As M. Eugene Boring warns, “It is misleading, superficial, and simplistic to attempt to understand the text in terms of a conflict between Jewish legalism and Jesus’ or the church’s freedom from the Law.”⁴ Rather, Matthew assumes that his audience understands, respects and perhaps has participated in both the joy of the Sabbath and the ongoing discussions about proper Sabbath observance. Commanded by God as part of the Decalogue (Exod 20.8–11), even observed by God at creation (Gen 2.2–3), the “keeping” of the Sabbath had for centuries been central to Jewish identity. Observant Jews saw it as a gift, not a burden. Precisely because “the Sabbath was so central to Jewish life, its proper observance was important.”⁵ Over time, a body of traditions had developed (*halakah*), regulating what was permitted and what constituted forbidden work on the Sabbath.⁶ In the grainfields story, Matthew explains none of this context. He assumes his audience understands that the Pharisees are charging Jesus’ disciples with “reaping,” a work specifically forbidden on the Sabbath.

Just what, then, made Jesus’ statements so powerful and provocative? For the answer, let us review his four replies to his challengers, considering what Matthew has chosen to emphasize and how he makes his case for Jesus as the ultimate interpreter of the law.

The First Response—the Example of David

To vindicate his disciples, Jesus points the Pharisees to the example of David (1 Sam 21.1–6). Having fled to the priests of Nob, David and his men were hungry, so David asked the high priest for bread. Although the only bread available was the showbread, David was given it to share with his men. Thus, Jesus implies, some circumstances—such as hunger—can excuse a violation of the law. This argument by Jesus has been identified as a *gezerah shawah*, one of Hillel’s seven *middoth*, in that it reasons by analogy, from similar words, phrases and circumstances. Therefore, Jesus may be seen as beating the Pharisees at their own game. However, this comparison is *haggadic* (based on story) rather than *halakhic* (based on legal ruling), so some interpreters would say that the *gezerah shawah* doesn’t hold: *haggadah* is ineffective to contradict *halakhah*.

The Second Response—Priests in the Temple

For his second response, Jesus does move to *halakhah*, reminding his opponents that although the law forbids work on the Sabbath, the priests in the temple are commanded to offer certain sacrifices every Sabbath, technically “profaning” the Sabbath (Num 28.9–10). Thus, disobedience to a command of the law

4. M. Eugene Boring, “Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 8:277.

5. Ibid.

6. According to m.Sabb. 7:2, thirty-nine classes of work—including reaping—were specified as prohibited on the Sabbath. For example, the rabbis permitted the saving of a life on the Sabbath (m.Yoma 8:6,7), as well as rescuing an animal from a pit or ditch (m.Sabb. 15:1; b.Shabb. 128b). However, healing where life was not in danger was forbidden (m.Sabb. 22:6).

may be excused, even demanded, by obedience to another commandment of the law.⁷ In this case, Jesus employs Hillel's principle of *qal wahomer*, which is an argument from minor to major, a reasoning *a fortiori*. If something is true in a minor matter, how much more will it be true/greater/better/imperative in a major matter. As Jesus declares, if the priests who violate the Sabbath in service of the temple are guiltless, how much more innocent are these disciples who violate the Sabbath for "something greater than the temple." Just what this something may be is not entirely clear from the text.⁸ Some interpreters believe it is Jesus; others, salvation or the kingdom; still others conclude it refers to mercy (*eleos*). The "mercy" meaning makes sense, in that the next words from Jesus' lips are a quotation from Hosea 6.6: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Since this is a Semitic expression that is not intended to abrogate sacrifice but to show the priority of mercy over sacrifice, a dual meaning may well have been intended. Both Jesus and the mercy he represents are the "Something Greater."

The Third Response—Quoting Scripture

After Jesus quotes Hosea 6.6, he condemns the Pharisees for not understanding its meaning. Obviously, neither Hosea nor Jesus was trying to outlaw the practice of sacrifice. After all, sacrifice was commanded by God and commended by Jesus.⁹ The Greek word Matthew uses for mercy, *eleos*, appears on Jesus' lips elsewhere in this Gospel only in 9.13 and 23.23, each time in controversy with the Pharisees about the true meaning of the law. Therefore, its presence may well indicate what Jesus meant when he demanded that his disciples' righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5.19). This mercy does not mean laxity about law-keeping nor mere pity and tender feelings. Scholars note that the word carries the meanings of compassion and loving-kindness but also retains some of its Old Testament connotation of covenant-loyalty, faithful acts of righteous conduct.¹⁰ The word translated mercy in this quotation is *hesed* in the Hebrew text of Hosea, a word used "to speak of the way God loves . . . showing steadfast love."¹¹ Mary H. Edin finds that for Matthew, righteousness and mercy are very nearly identified with each other. And since mercy and love are commanded in the Torah, Jesus was urging that the entire Torah be observed but in accordance with the priorities expressed by God through Hosea. It is not simply that human needs override all else; rather, Matthew "would say that the works of love commanded in 25:31–46 . . . take precedence over the Sabbath."¹² Sacrifice and Sabbath must subordinate to mercy.

We should also notice that in all three arguments, Jesus first appeals to, then attacks, the Pharisees' knowledge of scripture. If they had known the scriptures, he says, they would have behaved differently. This may represent Jesus' judgment in favor of scripture as the final authority over human tradition.¹³ However, I am not so sure. Perhaps Jesus was attacking the Pharisees' oral tradition, which was becoming a burden to people (Matt 23.4). Perhaps he was attacking all religious tradition, which seems unlikely, since he himself participated in traditional religious practices (such as synagogue customs), which were beyond the mandate

7. Many commentators see this precedence, this hierarchy of values, to be the very gist of Matthew's point. That is, "one divine demand may overrule another; and since the commandment to love is the greatest command of all, observance of it may on occasion lead to disobedience to OT legislation." Dale C. Allison Jr. and W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 311, 314. This would make Jesus not a violator of Torah but its upholder in the face of false interpreters.

8. The Greek word translated as "something greater" in verse 6 (*meizon*) is neuter, not masculine or feminine, which creates ambiguity about its referent.

9. For example, Jesus warned against breaking even the least of the law's commandments (Matt 5.19), directed the healed leper to go to the priest and offer a sacrifice (Matt 8.4), and presumed the ongoing practice of sacrifice (Matt 5.23–24).

10. David Hill, "On the Use and Meaning of Hosea VI.6 in Matthew's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 24 (Oct 1977): 109.

11. Mary H. Edin, "Learning What Righteousness Means: Hosea 6:6 and the Ethic of Mercy in Matthew's Gospel," *Word and World*, 18:4 (1988), 358.

12. Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, "The Sabbath Was Made for Man: The Interpretation of Mark 2:23–28," in *God of the Lowly* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 121.

13. John Mark Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1–14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27:2 (1984), 90.

of Torah. Instead, I am persuaded by Warren Carter's argument that Jesus *knew* that the Pharisees *knew* the scriptures Jesus was alluding to and quoting. What they lacked was not knowledge but discernment.¹⁴ If they had rightly understood and rightly interpreted the story of David and the showbread/the example of the priests in temple service/the God-priorities in Hosea, they would have extended mercy to the hungry disciples. Thus, we may read Jesus' teaching in the grainfields as congruent with the law, and the Hosea reference as proleptic of Matthew 23, where Jesus quotes it again to his Pharisee opponents and directs them to the weightier matters of the law: love, mercy and justice.

The Fourth Response—Lord of the Sabbath

Jesus' fourth response is a declaration that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.¹⁵ Although the phrase "Son of Man" can be understood in several senses, it seems that Matthew here intends it as a christological title and the entire grainfields passage as a christological statement. That is, the allusion to David in verse 3 can be seen as christological; the Matthew-only statement that "I tell you" in verse 6 is an assertion of Jesus' authority; and the culminating "Lord of the Sabbath" pronouncement ties the three arguments all together. From the way the arguments sweep up, up, up, from *gezera shawah* to *qal wahomer* to scripture to an assertion of Jesus' authority, I submit that the pericope is not only a controversy story but is really a pronouncement story about Jesus as Lord, Jesus as the Christ of God.

MORE VALUABLE THAN A SHEEP (MATTHEW 12.9–14)

Jesus' next *qal wahomer* argument concerns the healing of a man with a withered hand. Although the synoptic gospels all disclose that the Pharisees wanted to entrap him, only Matthew has them ask a provocative *halakhic* question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (12.10). While a contemporary reader might answer, "Of course," the first-century answer is not so clear-cut.¹⁶ Readers of this passage often ask why Jesus didn't just avoid this controversy. Since the man with the withered hand was not in immediate danger of death, why didn't Jesus "take the amenable route of compromise and wait a day."¹⁷ It seems obvious that Jesus intentionally provoked this controversy in order to raise the issue of what was really most important, which he does with another skillful *qal wahomer*:

Rather than answer immediately, Jesus turns the tables on his interlocutors. "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?" (12.11). Assuming that the Pharisees would permit a man to help his ox out of a ditch or his sheep out of a pit,¹⁸ Jesus continues: "How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!" (12.12). Only then, on the strength of the common-sense reasoning of his *qal wahomer*, does Rabbi Jesus, whom Matthew reveals as Lord Jesus, answer the Pharisees' question with his own *halakhic* ruling: "Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (12.12).

14. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 265.

15. Unlike the parallel account in Mark, Matthew does not include a statement by Jesus that the Sabbath was made for man (humankind), not man (humankind) for the Sabbath (Mark 2.27).

16. According to some authorities, the Essenes would have said "No." See Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1:173; Allison and Davies, 318; and Hicks, 82. All three sources cite the ruling in *Damascus Document* 11:13–14: "If a beast falls into a cistern or into a pit, let it not be lifted out on the Sabbath." On the other hand, the rabbis permitted the saving of life on the Sabbath day, although the Mishnah forbids the practice of medicine where life is not in danger. See m.Yoma 8:6, which provides, "A case of risk of loss of life supersedes the Sabbath." See also the Mekilta on Exodus 22.2 and m.Sabb 22:6.

17. Allison and Davies, 318.

18. Hicks, 82.

According to Dan Cohn-Sherbok, logically every *qal wahomer* has three propositions: two premises and one conclusion.

The first premise states that two things, A and B, stand to each other in the relation of major and minor importance. The second premise states that with one of these two things, A, a certain restrictive or permissive law is connected. The conclusion is that the same law is applicable to the other thing, B.¹⁹

In the present case, Jesus knows that it is beyond dispute that humans are of more value than sheep. The second premise is that an ordinary person would rescue his sheep from a pit on the Sabbath. Therefore, Jesus concludes, if it is lawful to rescue a sheep on the Sabbath, how much more correct, lawful and God-pleasing is it to “do good” to a human being on the Sabbath! We should notice that Jesus does not limit his conclusion to “healing,” much less to “healing of life-threatening conditions.” He generalizes the conclusion of his *qal wahomer* to establish a broad principle that does not overthrow the law but fulfills it: to do good on the Sabbath, to act in accordance with *eleos*, is a proper observation of the law.

GREATER THAN JONAH; GREATER THAN SOLOMON (MATTHEW 12.38–42)

The last two “greater than” statements in Matthew 12 are not fully fleshed-out *qal wahomer* arguments, but are condensed, with some elements implicit. Nevertheless, they follow the same logical premises as the classic *qal wahomer* and carry the same theological weight. When “some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you’” (v. 38), Jesus declares that the only sign to be given will be his resurrection after being in the earth three days, just as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days. The *qal wahomer* elements are all contained in Matthew 12.41:

The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!

Jesus knows that his audience knows its Bible. They are well aware of the story of Jonah preaching to the Ninevites, who heard the divine warning, repented and were spared. The Ninevites were pagans, but God sent a representative from afar (Jonah) to preach repentance to them. Similarly, God has sent a representative from afar (Jesus) to preach repentance to the Israelites, God’s chosen people (Premise A in the Cohn-Sherbok analysis of *qal wahomer* logic). The Ninevites listened to their God-sent emissary; had they not they would have been condemned and destroyed (Premise B). Because Jesus, the proclaimer to the Israelites, is far superior to Jonah, the proclaimer to the Ninevites, how much more should the Israelites heed Jesus’ message and how much worse will be their condemnation (the conclusion of the *qal wahomer* comparison). On the last day, the Ninevites will rise up and point an accusing finger at Jesus’ opponents, because “Something Greater” than Jonah is here.

Next, Jesus intensifies his censure of his accusers with a second *qal wahomer* application of a Hebrew Bible story, this time about Solomon and the Queen of the South. Again, Jesus is certain that his audience knows the story: the biblical account (1 Kgs 10.1–13; 2 Chr 9.1–12) of the Queen of Sheba, or Queen of the South, journeying from Arabia to test Solomon’s wisdom. She came, listened, was convinced and blessed the Lord for Solomon’s wisdom. In a similar way, these Israelite sign-seekers have been exposed to heaven-sent wisdom that Jesus has come to preach (*qal wahomer* Premise A). However, unlike the Queen of the South, the sign-seekers and their generation have failed to listen (*qal wahomer* Premise B). Because the wisdom offered to them is greater than the wisdom of Solomon, how much worse will be their condemnation on the day of judgment. The Gentile queen herself will rise up and accuse them because they did not listen to the “Something” that was greater than Solomon! The power of Jesus’ arguments in this Matthean pericope

19. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 21–22.

comes from the “wrenching reversal of expectations”²⁰ which climaxes both these *qal wahomer* illustrations from the Old Testament: his accusers are worse than the pagans!

Under Hillel’s hermeneutical rules, a *qal wahomer* argument could be defeated by demonstrating that the two items being compared did not stand in a minor-to-major relationship with each other. However, none of Jesus’ accusers dared contest his assertion that “something greater than the temple,” “something greater than Jonah” and “something greater than Solomon is here.” Thus, with a masterful accumulation of four *qal wahomer* applications of Old Testament scriptures, Jesus spoke with authority about himself—with logical reasoning calculated to reach the listening crowds, if not the scribes and Pharisees themselves.

MATTHEW’S MEANING

I think Matthew meant for his audience to see that obedience to Torah includes—and always included—the love of one’s neighbor and the discernment of the weightier matters of the law, that Jesus of Nazareth—the son of man—did ultimately turn out to be Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, and that acting out the law in a life of mercy is not only better than sacrifice: it’s the very meaning of righteousness. Doing good on the Sabbath is not just lawful: it is of the essence of the law. Moreover, the wisdom sent from God, Jesus himself, is the voice that we should listen to, and the sign sent from God—the sign of Jonah, the resurrection of Jesus—is the only sign we need.

Using the hermeneutical principles of his day and his culture—the *middoth* of Hillel, Jesus in Matthew invisibly weaves his theology by recalling stories from the Hebrew scriptures and reinterpreting them with *qal wahomer*. In Matthew 12 he leads his hearers through refrain after refrain of “greater thans,” so that when the final high note comes, those with ears to hear can do so. Not only does Jesus offer something greater than the temple, something more valuable than a sheep, and something greater than Jonah or Solomon. Not only is mercy greater than sacrifice. Of utmost importance to Matthew’s Jesus are the “greater than” principles of the law—the “weightier matters”—justice, mercy and faith.

MEANING FOR TODAY

My personal response to the Matthew 12 *qal wahomer* applications of Jesus is one of immense pleasure. I enjoy everything about them, including the drama and ambiguity, the tightness of argument and the deft comparisons included in Jesus’ exchange with the Pharisees. However, I doubt that either Jesus or Matthew intended these events to delimit the precise ways in which Sabbath-keeping or ceremonial worship must yield to “something greater.” As a Christian minister, I would not use these pericopae to make man (that is, people) the measure of all things. Rather, I would use them, along with the “what-does-the-Lord-require-of-you” teaching of Micah 6, the “weightier-matters-of-the-law” teaching of Jesus in Matthew 23, and the righteous-love-in-action examples of Matthew 25 to show that in the mind of the Lord of the Sabbath, some things matter more than others. Tithing one’s spices is commendable, but practicing love, mercy and justice matters more. Keeping the Sabbath (religious observance) is not casual, optional, or inconsequential. But neither is doing good, demonstrating *eleos* and *hesed*, and listening to the wisdom from above. Looking again at these Matthew 12 pericopae, I would say that rabbinic disputations do not preach well today, if they ever did. But bowing the knee to the Lord of the Sabbath, working in aid of those who are hungry, in need, and besieged by critical rule-keepers, healing the sick and listening to heaven-sent wisdom—these actions will change lives and do reasonable justice to the *qal wahomer* teachings of Matthew’s Jesus.

LINDA KING IS A DOCTORAL STUDENT IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AT BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL AND TEACHES AT THE OKLAHOMA CITY CAMPUS OF SAINT PAUL SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY.



20. Boring, 297.