



# A Review of the Rationale for Jesus' Use of David's Example in Matthew 12: 3-4 in Contemporary Scholarly Debate

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## ABSTRACT

The rationale for Jesus' use of David's story in Matt 12:3-4 has attracted varied views in biblical scholarship. The text records Jesus' use of David's example in the first Sabbath conflict in Matthew's Gospel. This article attempted to sample prominent scholarly views on the Matt 12:3-4. This article adopted a descriptive and evaluative approach to sample views of contemporary scholars in Jesus' use of David's example, Matt 12:3-4, in the first Sabbath conflict. The aims were to describe and evaluate contemporary scholarly views on why Jesus used David's story in Matthew 12:3-4. This article used the descriptive and evaluative qualitative method of research. This article surveyed the literature on the hermeneutical appraisal of David's example in Matt 12:3-4. It centered on scholarly arguments and appraisal of the rabbinic hermeneutics of Matt 12:1-8. Two prominent views on Jesus' methodology are identified as: (1) rabbinic hermeneutics and (2) typological hermeneutics. Scholarly arguments centered mainly on the Christological and authority approaches to the text. The authors concluded that the above postulations of scholars do not adequately explain why Jesus used the example of David in answering the Pharisaic query. Hence, a critical look at the text requires a hermeneutical review of the arguments advanced by scholars for these approaches. As such, further study to explore the possible reason why Jesus used David's example in Matt 12:3-4 would be in order. This research has contributed to scholarship on the Sabbath controversy in Matthew 12:1-8.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are two Sabbath conflict episodes recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (12:1-8 and 12:9-14). Matthew 12:1-8 records the disciples plucking and eating the heads of grain on Sabbath (v. 1); the Pharisees told Jesus that his disciples were breaking the law of the Sabbath (v. 2), and Jesus defended the action of his disciples (vv. 3-8). Matthew 12:1-8 is difficult to interpret.<sup>1</sup> Matthew's first Sabbath conflict has received several dividing interpretations. Among the debated issues, Matthew 12:3-4 and 12:5-6 has attracted controversial discussions. First, the rationale for Jesus' use of David's story, 12:3-

<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 130-132.

4, in defense of the action of the disciples has attracted myriads of attention. This article describes and evaluates the views of scholars on Jesus's use of David's story in 12:3-4.

### Scholarly Views on Matthew's Use of David's Story in Matthew 12:3-4

The debate on the import of Jesus' use of the example of David in Matthew 12:3-4 has centered mainly on the Christological and authority approaches to the text. However, a critical look at the text requires a hermeneutical review of the arguments advanced by scholars for these approaches. The issue of why Jesus used the example of David in his response to the query of the Pharisees is critical to any hermeneutical appraisal. This section reviews scholars' understanding of Jesus' method of using David's story. Behind these methodologies lie different but overlapping perspectives of the basis of Jesus' use of David's story. Two views on Jesus' methodology are identified as: (1) Rabbinic Hermeneutics and (2) Typological Hermeneutics.

### Rabbinic Hermeneutic of Matthew 12:1-8

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question is done using analogical hermeneutics. This is seen as a rabbinic hermeneutic of a *gezerah shewah*.<sup>2</sup> In the view of Donald Carson, Matthew 12:3-4 answers the Pharisees' question using the argument that "takes a common rabbinical form."<sup>3</sup> This juxtaposes the contradicting statements which attract an inference about regulations for the action (*Halakic* conclusion). The point highlighted by Jesus shows that the Bible does not judge nor condemn David's action. Therefore, Pharisees' strictness in their interpretation of the law was not in accordance with Scripture.<sup>4</sup> This clearly points out that, to the Pharisees, the OT was not right and for that matter could not articulate the story of David. There is, therefore, no violation of Scripture from the Pharisees apart from the *Halakic* interpretation of the Pharisees. Carson believes that Jesus used David's incident for several reasons.<sup>5</sup>

First, Jesus' use of David's story was not simply to question the view of the Sabbath of the Pharisees. This is because David's incident was not directly relevant to the arguments of Christ. Jesus was rather enquiring about the approach to the interpretation of the law.<sup>6</sup> Second, Jesus' reference to the written law was to set aside David and his men on the regulations of the Sabbath. This case can be seen as setting aside regulations or written law for Jesus and his disciple. This reason is sustainable "if Jesus is at least as special as David, and it is this conclusion that the argument builds in the following verses."<sup>7</sup>

The relation of Matthew 12:3-4 to 12:5-6 presents an argument which is seen as "*qal wahômer* (the weighty)," which Daube termed as *a fortiori* argument, a way for forming a *Halakic* regulation.<sup>8</sup> This argument is true when the "one greater than the Temple" (v. 6) is established as truly greater. Reference to 12:41-42 shows that the "one greater" is presented in neuter that can be translated as "something greater." The neuter can denote a person when emphasizing quality rather than the individual *per se*.<sup>9</sup> By identifying the argument of Jesus as *gezerah shewah*, Jesus is thus seen as meeting the Pharisees at the same point of reasoning. To King, the argument of the analogy is "*haggadic* (based on the story) rather than *halakhic* (based on the legal ruling).<sup>10</sup> So, some interpreters

<sup>2</sup> Linda King, "Jesus Argued like a Jew," *Leaven* 19, no. 2 (2011): 2; E.M. Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 278; D A Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Word Books, 1993), 329 <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=14ERAQAAIAAJ>; Samuel S Cohon, "The Place of Jesus in the Religious Life of His Day," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1929, 82-108.

<sup>3</sup> Donald A Carson, "Matthew. The Expositor's Bible Commentary," *Grand Rapids: Zondervan* 451 (1984), 8:280.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 8:281.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 8:280-281.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 8:280-281.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, "Matthew," 8:280-281.

<sup>8</sup> David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Carson, "Matthew. The Expositor's Bible Commentary"; James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard, and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (T. and T. Clark, 1949), 21.

<sup>10</sup> King, "Jesus Argued Like a Jew," 2.

would say that the *gezerah shewah* doesn't hold: *haggadah* is ineffective to contradict *halakhah*.”<sup>11</sup>

Boring, on the other hand, maintains that, like David, Jesus understood the Law in the context of its real intent.<sup>12</sup> Boring points out that the real intent of the Law is God's mercy for the poor and hungry.<sup>13</sup> In his view, David could overrule standard ritual laws on the bases of human need. Boring asserts that Jesus could also overrule the Sabbath on the basis of human needs. He maintains that the argument applies the rabbinic hermeneutical principle of *qal wahomer* (“light to heavy”).<sup>14</sup>

Hagner brings in the idea that the argument in Matthew 12:3-4 is a “straightforward analogy with the story narrated in 1 Sam 21:1-6.”<sup>15</sup> In his understanding, David and his men violated a direct commandment of God on a particular occasion of need and that “human need was put before the stipulations of the law.”<sup>16</sup> Hagner further expounds that “the OT law was thus violated in this special instance, and this example is at least a tactic admission that in a sense, the disciples' activity was not consistent with the Sabbath commandment.”<sup>17</sup> A statement that stands out in his argument is that if David and his companions were permitted to violate the letter of the law, Jesus and his disciples should also be permitted to violate the letter of the law.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus' second response to the Pharisees is a shift to *halakhah* in reminding them that while the Sabbath law prohibited work on the day, the priests are directed to offer certain sacrifices on the day, which in a way profane the Sabbath.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, obeying the law in a way was to be excused as a response to obeying another command of the law. King argues that Jesus uses the *qal wahomer* principle of Hillel in this instead, by arguing from minor to major, which is *a fortiori*.<sup>20</sup> King adds that “if something is true in a minor matter, how much more will it be true/greater/better/imperative in a major matter.”<sup>21</sup> Spencer contends that Jesus used a loose analogy by relating the priest's sacrificial duties on the Sabbath to the actions of the disciples.<sup>22</sup>

However, Jesus' use of David's story presents two main reasons as Spencer contends. (1) positively: (a) Jesus sustains a common ground with the Pharisees; (b) Jesus appeals to the Pharisees' biblical understanding and exposition; (c) Matthew showed Jesus as One with authority; and (d) The teachings of Jesus in Matthew are engrained in faith and practice of the OT. (2) Negatively: (a) The polemical setting recommends an acute challenge; (b) Jesus questions the Pharisees' hermeneutical capability to construe the Bible correctly; (c) Permitting Jesus' standpoint, the Pharisees' interpretation of the law was not measuring up (5:20), their oral traditions seldom broke the commandments of God (15:1-9), and their teachings contradicted their actions (23:1-3).<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that due to the agreement of Jesus and the Pharisees on the esteemed place of Scripture as the primary source of divine revelation, their arguments were most intense over proper interpretation/hermeneutics and demonstration/ethics.<sup>24</sup> The statement, “Have you not read” (12:3), can be seen as the challenge of Jesus “with particular appeal to the basic hermeneutical principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, that is, reading one passage not in isolation, but in conversation with other passages, indeed, the entire canon.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus' objection to the Pharisees' way of interpretation

<sup>11</sup>King, “Jesus Argued Like a Jew,” 2.

<sup>12</sup>Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 8:278.

<sup>13</sup>Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 8:278.

<sup>14</sup>Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” 8:278.

<sup>15</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 329.

<sup>16</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 329.

<sup>17</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 329.

<sup>18</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 329; N Battey, *Covenant Faithfulness: An Examination of Matthew 12:1-14* (Independent Publisher, 2020), 29. [https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=pxZ\\_zQEACAAJ](https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=pxZ_zQEACAAJ).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Num 28:9-10.

<sup>20</sup>King, “Jesus Argued Like a Jew,” 2-3.

<sup>21</sup>King, “Jesus Argued Like a Jew,” 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> F Scott Spencer, “Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus,” *Interpretation* 64, no. 4 (2010): 368.

<sup>23</sup>Spencer, “Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus,” 368.

<sup>24</sup>Spencer, “Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus,” 369.

<sup>25</sup>Spencer, “Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus,” 369.

was to indicate his hermeneutic understanding. The Pharisees applied a single text (or set of texts) to the neglect of other texts that balance or complicate ethical practice in some fashion. The way Matthew presents Jesus as one with total and complete authority to the interpretation of God's word (cf. 7:28-29; 28:16-20), is not "facilely pigeonholed into any pre-set interpretative program."<sup>26</sup>

This approach, however, faces two problems: (a) Jesus' response is inadequate from the standpoint of rabbinic argument in principle (*haggadah* cannot provide the basis for *halakah*) and in hermeneutics (*gezerah shewah* necessitates verbal analogies between passages, although a similar concept may call for it).<sup>27</sup> (b) The example between David's actions and Jesus' behavior breaks down completely. Whereas the conduct of David and his companions come into question, Jesus' action does not. Whereas David is said to have been hungry, nothing comparable is said of Jesus. Whereas David's conduct involved illegally eating the showbread, Jesus did nothing unlawful. Therefore, comparing David with Jesus makes the comparison awkward.<sup>29</sup>

Hicks, however, explains that this position is not to assert the unsound interpretation or argument of Jesus, but for its acceptance by the rabbinic community unless they were supported by a *halakaic* argument.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, this is exactly what is found in Matthew's account. Matthew's addition of the argument from the Temple service unlike Mark can be seen as *halakaic* in nature. This is a historical account that Matthew includes in his Gospel. As Hicks has pointed out, Matthew required something more than an example of *haggadic* significance to justify the action of Jesus' disciples for his audience.<sup>31</sup>

In Matthew's view, Jesus uses a *haggadic* example (David's story) to buttress his *halakaic* discourse. Matthew thus presented a more technical rabbinic argument by making use of the example of David with this *halakaic* argument (Temple service). For Hicks, "Matthew has portrayed Jesus as a careful rabbi who argues his case in good rabbinic fashion."<sup>32</sup> The Pharisees asked a *halakaic* question that needed a *halakaic* response to be rabbinically valid. The conjunction of the example of v. 5 with the principle of v. 6 constitutes such a response. The example of the priests profaning the Sabbath is rooted in an explicit precept of Scripture and therefore has *halakaic* significance. Daube stated that a *halakah* or rule may be deduced from a precept if the norms of rabbinical hermeneutics are followed. Verse 6 utilizes one of those rabbinic hermeneutical principles. Matthew uses the inference *a fortiori*, "*qal wahomer*, (the light and weighty)."<sup>33</sup> This shows an extrapolation from a lesser point to a more significant/vital one. This, therefore, presents the argument of Jesus claiming: If the priests may profane the Sabbath in Temple services, then his disciples may profane the Sabbath in the service of the kingdom since the kingdom is greater than the Temple.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, it has been observed that Scholars who adhere to the rabbinic interpretation of Jesus' use of David's story are divided. Whereas some see it as a rabbinic hermeneutic principle of *gezerah shewah* (analogy) or *qal wahomer* (light to heavy), others see it as *haggadic* (a story). This

<sup>26</sup> Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," 369.

<sup>27</sup> W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, Jr., *Matthew 8-18*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2003), 308, 313; Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," 371; Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 71, in Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," in F. E. Gaebelein (ed.), *EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:281; D. M. Cohn-Sherbok, "An Analysis of Jesus' Arguments Concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath," *JSNT*, 2(1979): 34.

<sup>28</sup> W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew: Volume 2: 8-18*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 1999), 308, 313.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=xj8dHdRZ7msC>; Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 71; Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Stanley E Porter, and Craig A Evans, "An Analysis of Jesus' Arguments Concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath," *The Historical Jesus*, 1995, 131-39.

<sup>29</sup> J P Meier, *Matthew*, Michael Glazier Book (Liturgical Press, 1980), 129.

<https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=G4YYYsn9FW0C>.

<sup>30</sup> John Mark Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12: 1-14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1984): 85.

<sup>31</sup> Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12: 1-14," 85; David Hill, "On the Use and Meaning of Hosea vi. 6 in Matthew's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 24, no. 1 (1977): 114.

<sup>32</sup> Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew," 87.

<sup>33</sup> Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew," 86.

<sup>34</sup> Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew," 86.



further attests to how scholars are divided on the hermeneutic scheme that Jesus might have used.

### Typological Hermeneutics in Matthew 12:1-8

D. Garland, Yang, and France identify the existence of David's typology in Matthew 12:3-4.<sup>35</sup> France agrees with Yang that David, the king, was a type of Jesus, the antitype and the messiah who had the authority to interpret the law.<sup>36</sup> In their view, the typology is to help in appreciating why Jesus appealed to David's story in Matt 12:3-4.<sup>37</sup> Garland asserts that David's typology depicts the role of Jesus as Messiah without any obligation or restriction under the law, and that his actions are not judged by the Bible.<sup>38</sup> For Garland, the main issue in the story of David is "the relationship between the great David and his retinue and the greater Jesus and his disciples."<sup>39</sup> Garland agrees with France that if David could do what other ordinary people could not do, Jesus could also do what others could not do because he has greater authority than David.<sup>40</sup> This leads to the conclusion that if David had the liberty to disregard the Law, then Jesus, in like manner, disregarded it on the basis of his greater authority.<sup>41</sup>

Some scholars also recognize the Temple typology, seeing Jesus as the antitype of the Temple. Viljoen postulates that Jesus makes use of Temple-typology in Matthew 12:5-6.<sup>42</sup> He further asserts that Jesus is greater than the Temple because the presence of God is more experienced in Jesus' company than in the Temple.<sup>43</sup>

However, it should be pointed out that this approach presents a problem due to the following: (a) Matthew 12:3-4 compares the conduct of David and those with him with the conduct of Jesus' disciples.<sup>44</sup> Proponents, however, compare David with his companions and Jesus with his disciples. And (b) The David-typology approach makes a Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry instead of an argument to justify the conduct of Jesus' disciples.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, scholars explain Jesus' use of the example of David as a rabbinic hermeneutics or typological hermeneutics. Generally, Jesus is seen as the antitype of David. This assumption may explain the messianic reading of Jesus' use of David's story in Matthew 12:1-8. Sound typological hermeneutics may focus on the essential correspondence between the person, event, or thing compared. It is suggestive then that Jesus' action and David's conduct should be compared. However, both stories differ since Jesus was not hungry and did nothing unlawful but David was and did. Therefore, comparing David with Jesus makes the comparison awkward. Also, it has been pointed out that Matthew 12:3-4 compares the conduct of David and those with him with the conduct of Jesus' disciples. While scholars compare David (with his companions) and Jesus (with his disciples), the passage seems to present a different picture. The David-typology approach makes an argument to justify the conduct of Jesus' disciples, thereby advancing the Christological statement about Jesus and his ministry. None of the postulations of scholars, however, adequately explains why Jesus used the example of David in answering the Pharisaic query.

<sup>35</sup> D E Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, Reading the New Testament Series (Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 136. <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=8CKue4eT83gC>; Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, vol. 139 (A&C Black, 1997), 176; R T France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (Regent College Publishing, 2000), 46, 47 <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=ElHZj7OyJDoC>.

<sup>36</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 46, 47; Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 46, 47; Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, 176.

<sup>38</sup> Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 136.

<sup>39</sup> Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, 136; France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission*.

<sup>41</sup> Garland, *Reading Matthew*, 136, 137.

<sup>42</sup> Francois P Viljoen, "Sabbath Controversy in Matthew," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (2011): 9, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Viljoen, "Sabbath Controversy in Matthew," 9, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Charles H Cosgrove, "Case-Precedent in John Chrysostom's Interpretation of" Plucking Grain on the Sabbath"(Matt 12.1-8)," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 30, no. 1 (2022): 60.

<sup>45</sup> David Daube, "Responsibilities of Master and Disciples in the Gospels," *New Testament Studies* 19, no. 1 (1972): 6, 7.

A study to explore the possible reason why Jesus used David's example in Matthew 12:3-4 would be in order. In the synoptic gospel analysis, the intention is to seek the place, premium on the theological interest of the gospel writer. A consideration of Jesus' use of David's story in the Synoptic Gospels shows both significant verbal and conceptual differences.<sup>46</sup> This is due to the theological interest of each, in view of the overall purpose of writing. Apart from assessing Jesus' intent in using David's story, one may need to appreciate why Matthew included this Sabbath conflict episode in its present place and the overarching purpose of writing.

## SUMMARY

The review of the literature indicated above can be summarized as follows: Scholarly views on the hermeneutical appraisal of David's example in Matthew 12:3-4 are as follows: Jesus' methodology identified: (a) rabbinic hermeneutics, and (b) typological hermeneutics. In all, Jesus is connected with David.

Boring thinks that Matthew 12:3-4 presents Jesus as an authority. Like David, Jesus overrules the Sabbath on the basis of the necessity of humankind. Blomberg further stresses the authority of Jesus as the one who "can transcend the law and make permissible for his disciples what once was forbidden." Did Jesus overrule the Sabbath in the capacity of the king of Israel as the anointed David was? And for what reason did Jesus use David's story? Yang, on the other hand, observes that Matthew 12:3-6 presents Jesus as greater than both David and the Temple. However, Garland opines that in Matthew 12:3-4, Jesus is shown as the Messiah and antitype of David who ignored the law in an emergency situation.

What is clear from this brief overview of scholars' understanding of Jesus' use of the story of David is that (1) Jesus has authority like David; (2) Jesus presents himself as the Messiah and an antitype of David; or (3) Jesus sees himself as greater than David and/or the Temple. In sum, scholars compare Jesus with David and that Jesus has the authority to ignore the law. Questions that might proceed from the above scholarly positions on the text are: Why did Jesus use David's story to answer the question of the Pharisees in Matthew 12:3-4? And what hermeneutical principle did Matthean Jesus use in Matthew 12:3-4?

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted a review of the rationale for Jesus' use of David's example in Matthew 12:3-4 in contemporary scholarly debate. The discussion so far has observed that Matthew 12:3-4 has been interpreted through David-Jesus messianic lense. However, a critical look at the text in its setting questions or challenges this general understanding or long-held views. The above review of related literature on Jesus' use of David's example has presented a main gap: the hermeneutic analysis of Jesus' use of David's story in Matthew 12:3-4 has not received adequate attention or lacks scholarly consensus. There is, therefore, the need for further study of Jesus' methodology in Matthew 12:3-4.

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<sup>46</sup> Davies and Allison, *Matthew: Volume 2: 8-18I*, 308, 313; Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," 371; Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, 71.

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