

# Lord Even of the Sabbath

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

During the Medieval era when most Christians could not read, the sabbath controversy stories were “illuminated” for believers by the colorful images in illuminated manuscripts of the Bible. These stories and images, in their own way, proclaim that “the sabbath was made for humankind” and therefore “the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”

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**A**fter Jesus heals a blind man on the sabbath, some Pharisees conclude of Jesus, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others disagree: “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” Since the Pharisees “were divided,” they turned to the blind man: “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened” (John 9:16-17). Perceptive readers of the gospel realize that once again John is thinking of spiritual blindness and sight, and now addresses them directly, “What do you say about Jesus?”

During the Medieval era (c. 550-1200) when most Christians could not read, the sabbath controversy stories were “illuminated” for believers by the colorful images alongside the text in illuminated manuscripts of the Bible. These manuscripts, which were hand copied in monasteries throughout the Carolingian, Ottoman, and Byzantine Empires and stored in *scriptoria* (libraries), were truly the collaborative works of monks, theologians, scribes, and illuminators.

*The Healing of the Withered Hand* (Luke 6:6-12), c. 980, is illustrated in *Codex Egberti*, a small book approximately 9” x 12”, produced for Archbishop Egbert, the chancellor to the Emperor Otto II. The *Codex* presents

the gospels in the order they are read in the course of the church calendar and fifty-one miniatures illustrating gospel stories.

In this story the scribes and Pharisees are watching Jesus carefully in order to accuse him of violating the sabbath law. Despite this, when Jesus sees a person with a physical ailment, he calls him over, explains to the watching scribes and Pharisees why he should heal on the sabbath in anti-



*The Healing of the Withered Hand.* c. 980. Manuscript Illumination. Reichenau School. *Codex Egberti*.

ipation of their criticism, and cures the person. The illustration shows the moment that Jesus tells the man, "Stretch out your hand" (6:10). Two Pharisees, to the left under a superscription "seniores," are talking between themselves even before the man is healed. Two disciples stand with Jesus in the middle, and one disciple raises his hand in imitation of his Lord. The lame man is using his good hand to hold up the diseased one (unlike later paintings which show Christ holding the sick hand). The illumination reflects the flat, gestural style of Byzantine art. Like the popular medium of the day, mosaics, the figures are silhouetted in black. Toes and fingers are exaggerated, and all the figures are placed on the frontal plane as if their feet may slide off into our space.

Jesus is again teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath in Luke 13:10-17. He sees a crippled woman, calls her over and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (13:12). The leader of the synagogue criticizes Jesus, instructing the crowd that there are six other days for work but not

the sabbath. Jesus responds, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (13:16).



*The Healing of the Crippled Woman.* c. 1190. Manuscript Illumination. Central Rhine. *Prayer Book of Hildegard of Bingen.*

This twelfth century manuscript illumination of the story is in the prayer book of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Hildegard wrote on theology and accounts of her visions, healed with natural objects, and found medicinal uses for plants. Bishops, popes, and kings sought her advice (she was known as "Sybil of the Rhine") during a time when women were not usually in a position of knowledge. It is appropriate that her personal prayer book illustrates Jesus curing a woman. Jesus blesses with his right hand as his left thumb barely touches the shoulders of the bent woman. The two figures dominate the pictorial field entirely; they appear to be standing on some disproportional landscape of shrunken mountains and trees.

The story of the man born blind (John 9:1-41), though much longer than the two stories discussed above, follows a similar pattern. In its first section (9:1-12) Jesus is walking and sees the blind man, whom Jesus explains was not born blind due to his parents' sins, but that God's works might be revealed in him (9:3). We, too, must do the work of God "while it is day," Jesus cryptically remarks, for no one can work at night. Since Jesus is "the light of the world," he is not teaching about when to work, but that a disciple who follows him also must do God's work (9:4-5).

The manuscript illumination below shows the next events in the story. On the left side, two disciples watch as Jesus, who has spit on the ground to make some mud, places it on the man's eyes. The blind man reaches forward to experience Jesus' right hand extended in healing. On the right, the illumination follows the narrative to the next scene: the man, according to Jesus' directive, washes his eyes in the pool of Siloam while his neighbors watch in wonder (9:7-9).

Only in the second portion of the story (9:13-35) do we learn that this miracle occurs on a sabbath. The Pharisees investigate the situation, but they cannot agree; some conclude that the healer is not from God because he does not observe the sabbath (9:16). Those who do not want to admit that the man was blind seek out and question his parents. Since the parents are afraid of "the Jews" who say anyone who calls Jesus the Messiah will be expelled from the synagogue, they reply that the man is old enough to speak for himself! The religious authorities question the man again, trying



*The Healing of the Man Born Blind.* c. 575. Manuscript Illumination. Probably Constantinople or western Asia Minor. *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis.*

to catch him in a lie or contradiction, yet he loyally maintains that Jesus is from God.

This illumination is from the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis* (c. 575), one of the oldest and most valuable manuscripts in the world. Produced in the Byzantine Empire, probably in Constantinople or western Asia Minor, only

fifteen of its 386 surviving pages are illustrated with miniatures. (The original manuscript is believed to have been over 800 pages.) The *Codex* parchment is dyed purple; this originally symbolized the emperor and his court, but by the sixth century its associations included sacred Christian vessels and vestments. Manuscripts and paintings on purple parchment usually used gold or silver script, and were products of high quality and cost.

Each story and illumination, in its own way, clarifies Jesus' teaching that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). Curing the sick or freeing the bound is not an unlawful work, as the Pharisees (Luke 6, John 9) or synagogue leader (Luke 13) argue, but is the work of God's goodness that should never stop. This man, Jesus, is from God, and he does obey the sabbath.

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