

About the Story

Bent-Over Woman (Luke 13:10-17)

Teaching in the Synagogue

In the first century when Jesus lived, some Judeans worshipped in small gatherings in a building called a “synagogue.” Men entered through the main door and sat together. Women had a separate door and sat in a gallery upstairs (if there was one).

In synagogue worship there would be prayer and scripture readings and teaching. The scriptures were written on scrolls, not in a book like we use today. The scrolls would be rolled out on a table to read.

Rabbi means “teacher.” If a rabbi was present in the synagogue, he would teach about the scripture after it was read. He would interpret it for the people. The scripture would be read standing up, and then the rabbi would sit down to teach. An example of this pattern is in the story of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town (Luke 4:16-27).

Sabbath

Sabbath was the day that God’s people set aside each week to rest and worship. It was in remembrance of God having rested on the seventh day after all the work that God had done in Creation. Sabbath began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday.

Sabbath was a cornerstone of Israelite identity. It was what made the Judeans different from everyone else who did not observe the Sabbath. It helped them maintain their sense of belonging to a special community of faith. It helped them survive as a people when they were conquered and oppressed by enemy peoples.

Many religious laws developed about what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. Some people were careful to abide by these laws. Others ignored them, and sometimes got in trouble with religious authorities.

There are a number of stories about Jesus in the Gospels where he does things on the Sabbath that religious authorities, like the leader of the synagogue in this story, say he should not do. They understand him to be breaking an important law and are angry about it.

The people of Israel had a different concept of “day” than we do. They understood a new day to begin at sundown. The Sabbath day began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. So the “six days on which work ought to be done” were Saturday at sundown until sundown the following Friday.

(over)

Spirit

Spirits were a very present reality for people living in the ancient Near East where the Gospel stories take place. People explained many illnesses, ailments, and mental disorders as being caused by evil spirits or demons. The woman in this story is said to have “a spirit that crippled her for eighteen years.”

Today we might look for the sources of her condition in an emotional trauma or a physical problem. In biblical times they attributed it to a spirit. Whatever the source, she had been suffering with this condition for a very long time.

The Conflict

The leader’s anger is not addressed to Jesus directly, but to the crowd. Of course, it is meant for Jesus’ ears as well. Jesus then also speaks to the crowd as a way of addressing the leader. His response is probably not as angry as the synagogue leader’s, but this is a real fight.

Jesus assumes that the congregation initially agrees with the leader. Therefore he addresses them about their hypocrisy in relation to being angry about healing the woman on the Sabbath when they wouldn’t hesitate to care for their animals on the Sabbath. Jesus assumes that every man in the congregation would take care of their animals on the Sabbath.

Satan

Jesus says that Satan is responsible for the woman’s affliction. Satan was understood to be a personal hostile power opposing God. They believed Satan expressed that opposition by attacking God’s people. Sometimes the attack was in the form of a physical affliction.

Satan was understood to be very powerful, the ruler of a kingdom, with demons under his authority. Satan means “the accuser.” Satan was an adversary, a tempter, a deceiver, who tried to draw humans away from allegiance to God.

At the same time, people thought that Satan was under the control of God. Early Christians believed that Jesus’ resurrection was a sign of God’s ultimate victory over Satan and the powers of evil Satan represents.