

Acts 20:7

“Messiah Followers Meeting on ‘the first of the week’”

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul *began* talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight.”

Acts 20:7 is frequently referenced as evidence indicating the early, First Century establishment of what would develop into “Sunday Church,” an institution likely as a replacement of, but certainly concurrent with, for the Jewish Believers, Saturday *Shabbat*. But when we read Acts 20:7, what is actually in view? The narrative statement actually occurs within Luke’s record of Paul having left Ephesus (Acts 19) and traveling through Macedonia, on an elongated return journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:1-4). When Paul arrives at Troas from Philippi, he stays in the city for a week (Acts 20:5-6). The night before he sets sail to go to Assos (Acts 20:13), the Believers in Troas gather together for a time of fellowship and teaching. A particular young man named Eutychus fell asleep during Paul’s teaching, fell down three stories, and was killed, but Paul embraced him and he was resurrected (Acts 20:7-12).

Among commentators, not all are agreed that Acts 20:7 speaks of a gathering of ancient Believers on Sunday. For sure, given how Paul’s teaching to the Believers in Troas lasted well into the night, it can be recognized how this is **not Sunday morning church**. For those who believe that a Sunday gathering is intended here, with a Roman reckoning of hours employed, then a Sunday evening gathering extending into Monday is what is actually being talked about. Alternatively, though, if a Jewish reckoning of the day is being used, then this gathering took place on Saturday evening and extended into Sunday. Of course, the Believers in Troas meeting on the first of the week—however the hours may be reckoned—hardly means a canceling of the seventh-day Sabbath, and/or a transfer of the Sabbath to Sunday. The statement of Acts 20:7 appears within a wider record of the Apostle Paul in transit back toward Jerusalem, and the first of the week, in the evening, was the most ideal time for him to have met with the Messiah followers in Troas.

That not all agree on what *En de tē mia tōn sabbatōn* (Ἐν δὲ τῇ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων) or “And on the first of the week” identifies (note the absence of the term *hēmera*, ἡμέρα or “day”), is witnessed in a number of less common translations. There is variance present from simply recognizing this as the day after the Sabbath, to Sunday, to Saturday night, or even to representing Jewish customs in association with the close of the Sabbath:

- “on the day after the sabbath” (*Original New Testament*)¹
- “We met on Sunday to worship” (The Message); “The Sunday night before our Monday departure” (The Voice).
- “On the Saturday night” (NEB/REB); “On the Saturday” (Phillips New Testament).
- “On *Motza’ei-Shabbat*” (CJB); “And after sundown at the end of the Sabbath, *with a service called Havdalah*” (Power New Testament).²

The variance among these quoted versions reflects the disagreement on whether “And on the first of the week” represents a Roman or Jewish reckoning of the hours in Acts 20:7.

Some commentators prefer to just mention the different methods of reckoning hours: indicating that a Roman reckoning with a day beginning and ending from midnight to midnight would mean that Acts 20:7 is Sunday to Monday, and a Jewish reckoning with a day beginning in the evening would mean that Acts 20:7 is Saturday to Sunday.³

¹ Hugh J. Schonfield, trans., *The Original New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 249.

² William J. Morford, trans., *The Power New Testament: Revealing Jewish Roots*, third edition (Lexington, SC: Shalom Ministries, 2003), 195.

³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 382; Fernando, 530; Barrett, 950; Gilbert, in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 238.

Schnabel, 835 while favoring Sunday, mentions the different options, and thinks that they both have different “variables” affecting them.

Acts 20:7 Sabbath and Rest in the Apostolic Scriptures

More Christian commentators on Acts than not, do favor Acts 20:7 employing a Roman reckoning of hours,⁴ although with some being tentative about it. More frequently, it is concluded that while noting holidays codified in the Torah as a part of the Jewish calendar, Luke follows a Roman reckoning of time for the hours of days, a likely product of the Book of Acts being intended for a mixed Jewish, Greek, and Roman audience.⁵ Particularly reflective of this would be Ben Witherington III, who concludes,

“Did Luke follow the Jewish way of reckoning time in which days were reckoned from sundown to sundown, or the Roman way in which midnight to midnight was seen as the way of dividing days? If the former, then this meeting would apparently have been held on what we would call Saturday night; if the latter, on Sunday night. Pointing in the direction of the former way of reckoning days is Luke’s use of the Jewish phrase here, ‘the first of the sabbath,’ which originally meant the first day after the sabbath, then the first day of the week (cf. Mark 16:2; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10; *Did.* 14:1; *Barn* 15:9). Against Luke’s following the Jewish way of reckoning days are texts like Acts 2:15 and 3:1, where, like the Romans, Luke reckons the hours of daytime beginning at dawn (6 A.M.). In short, Luke seems to follow the Jewish religious calendar but the Roman means of reckoning time (cf. Luke 24:1), another clue that our author had one foot in the Jewish and another in the Greco-Roman world.”⁶

There are a few Christian commentators on Acts, though, who do favor a Jewish reckoning of hours being present in Acts 20:7.⁷ Robert W. Wall, in particular, states,

“This congregation probably followed traditional sabbath rules and so began worship on Saturday evening after sunset into Sunday’s dawn (see v. 11). The practice of ‘breaking bread’ refers to a common meal rather than to the Lord’s supper and is symbolic of their social and spiritual solidarity (see 2:45-46). Such meals were opportunities to gather together for community prayer and to hear inspired teaching (see 2:42).”⁸

Messianic Jewish teachers, not surprisingly, favor Acts 20:7 to widely be employing a Jewish reckoning of hours, meaning that this gathering of Messiah followers took place on Saturday evening, as the Sabbath was closing, and extended into Sunday morning. The CJB rendering of Acts 20:7 reflects this, offering the slight paraphrase, “On *Motza’ei-Shabbat*, when we were gathered to break bread, Sha’ul addressed them. Since he was going to leave the next day, he kept talking until midnight.”⁹ David H. Stern summarizes in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*,

“*Motza’ei-Shabbat* [מֹצְאֵי שַׁבָּת] in Hebrew means ‘departure of the Sabbath’ and refers to Saturday night. The Greek text here says, ‘the first day of the *sabbaton*,’ where the Greek *sabbaton* [σάββατον] transliterates Hebrew *Shabbat* [שַׁבָּת] and may be translated ‘Sabbath’ or ‘week,’ depending on the context. Since *Shabbat* itself is only one day, ‘the first day of the *sabbaton*’ must be the first day of the week.

“But what was meant by ‘the first day of the week’? Or, to make the question’s relevance to Messianic Judaism clearer, were the believers meeting on Saturday night or on Sunday night? (It is clear from the verse that the meeting was in the evening.) A Saturday night meeting would fit more naturally with Jewish *Shabbat* observance, wherein the restful spirit of *Shabbat* is often preserved into Saturday evening, after the official end of *Shabbat* itself, which occurs after sunset when it gets dark enough to see three stars. It would be natural for Jewish believers who had rested on *Shabbat* with the rest of the Jewish community to assemble afterwards to celebrate their common faith in Yeshua the Messiah. The Gentile believers who came along later would join in the already established practice, especially since many of them would have been ‘God-fearers’ (10:2N) already accustomed to following the lead of the Jews in whose company they had chosen to place themselves. And since by Jewish reckoning days commence after sunset, the sense of the Greek text seems best rendered by ‘*Motza’ei-Shabbat*,’ not ‘Sunday.’

“In various places this commentary notes the Christian Church’s tendency to expunge Jewish influences, and I think an instance arises when the present verse is understood to refer to Sunday night...”¹⁰

⁴ Toussaint, in *BKCNT*, pp 412-413; Bruce, *Acts*, 408; Stott, *Acts*, 319.

⁵ Marshall, *Acts*, pp 325-326; Bock, pp 619-620; Peterson, 557.

⁶ Witherington, *Acts*, 606.

⁷ Baird, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 756.

⁸ Wall, in *NIB*, 10:277.

⁹ The TLV is far more literal in its rendering of Acts 20:7, concurring with most other major versions: “Now on the first day of the week, we gathered to break bread. Paul was talking with them, intending to leave the next day, so he prolonged his speech till midnight.”

¹⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 297-298; also Liberman, 283.

Messianic Sabbath Helper

There is no requirement for “And on the first of the week” in Acts 20:7 to represent a Roman reckoning of hours, and with this being a Sunday to Monday timeframe. The alternative, with a Jewish reckoning of hours in view, makes this a Saturday evening to Sunday timeframe. Either way, though, the tradition of the Christian Church of holding its services on Sunday morning is decisively absent; a better case would be made here for Sunday evening services.

For those who favor a Saturday evening fellowship in Acts 20:7, it cannot go overlooked how while the weekly Sabbath would not be disregarded by these Believers, that Saturday evening can often be a time for more to be done. We are not told whether the Believers in Troas fellowshiped with a local Jewish synagogue, and then held their own gatherings. Today, various Messianic congregations actually may hold an afternoon service, and then observe *havdallah*.