

Resurrection, Sunday

Is it really true that Yeshua was resurrected on Sunday? Does a Sunday morning resurrection of the Messiah at all validate the common Christian observance of Sunday as “the Lord’s Day”?

This information has been adapted from the sub-section “The Resurrection of the Messiah,” from the article “The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology” by J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*.

In today’s mainstream Christian thought, it is simply assumed that Yeshua the Messiah resurrected on Sunday morning, and so it should be no surprise why the Lord’s resurrection is honored once a year on Resurrection Sunday (many churches do make an honest effort to not use the term “Easter”). Yet, whether or not Yeshua was actually raised from the dead on Sunday morning can be challenged from the Greek text of the Synoptics:

“When the Sabbath was over [*Kai diagenomenou tou Sabbatou, Καὶ διαγενομένου τοῦ σαββάτου*], Mary Magdalene, and Mary the *mother* of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him. Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen” (Mark 16:1-2, NASU).

“Now after the Sabbath [*Opse de sabbatōn, Ὀψὲ δὲ σαββάτων*], as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave” (Matthew 28:1, NASU).

“But on the first day of the week [*Tē de mia tōn sabbatōn, Τῆ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων*], at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared” (Luke 24:1, NASU).

All three of these witnesses indicate the Marys’ intent to go and anoint the body of Yeshua with various spices and ointments, as it would retard the smell of decay. (Obviously following the death of Yeshua, there was no morgue available, where the body could be refrigerated until internment.) We can safely assume that they did make it to the gravesite, as early as they could be there, on Sunday morning.

Both Mark and Luke indicate that the Marys had arrived at Yeshua’s gravesite by Sunday morning, but Matthew’s witness interjects something that we need not overlook. The clause which begins Matthew 28:1 is *Opse de sabbatōn* (Ὀψὲ δὲ σαββάτων), with the preposition *opse* (ὀψε) notably able to mean: “*late in the day, at even*” (LS),¹ “**pert. to an advanced point of time in the day (usually between sunset and darkness), late**” (BDAG),² “*late in the day, in the evening*” (A Reader’s Greek New Testament).³ The 1901 American Standard Version opens Matthew 28:1 with “Now late on the sabbath day,” followed by Lattimore’s rendering, “Late on the sabbath.” While some may think that the inclusion of “...as it began to dawn toward...” in Matthew 28:1 settles the fact that this was actually in the morning hours, the verb *epiphōskō* (ἐπιφώσκω) fully means “*to draw towards dawn*” (LS),⁴ something which in Hebraic time reckoning begins in the evening. While some are inclined to think that Matthew is just using Jewish-specific language to describe what is entirely a Sunday morning event,⁵ I would suggest that Matthew’s witness interjects something additional into the record, especially given the occurrence of the earthquake (Matthew 28:2). In its entry for *epiphōskō*, AMG explains,

¹ LS, 582.

² BDAG, 746.

³ Richard J. Goodrich and Albert L. Lukaszewski, *A Reader’s Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 85.

⁴ LS, 306.

⁵ Cf. John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp 1244-1245.

“In the evening of the Sabbath when the Jewish day was drawing on towards the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went (or better, set out). It does not appear that they actually came at this time to visit the sepulcher, perhaps being delayed by the great earthquake (Matt. 28:2) which preceded our Lord’s resurrection.”⁶

Matthew’s interjection of *Opse de sabbatōn*, more correctly regarding “Late on the Sabbath,” indicates that the Marys’ intention was to go to the gravesite of Yeshua as soon as the weekly Sabbath was over—in our estimation, having been preceded by the Passover High Sabbath on Friday, and now the weekly Sabbath on Saturday. They were stopped from proceeding, because as the Sabbath day closed, in the dusk moments, the earthquake signaling Yeshua’s resurrection occurred. While the Marys would try again on Sunday morning, discovering the empty tomb, **this would mean that Yeshua did not actually resurrect from the dead on Sunday morning—but actually Saturday evening.** The witness of the Synoptics that follows only states that the empty tomb was discovered on Sunday morning.

There can be a great deal of unnecessary discussion that occurs among some Messianics, specifically as it concerns the Gospels’ usage of “first day of the week,” appearing in the Greek as *mian sabbatōn* (μία σαββάτων, Matthew 28:1) or *mia tōn sabbatōn* (μία τῶν σαββάτων, Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1). Confusion has been caused because a version like Young’s Literal Translation renders these clauses as “the first of [the] sabbaths.” Some people, seeing the term *sabbaton* (σαββάτου) multiple times in a single verse, assume that something is up when in one place it is rendered as “Sabbath,” and in another place it is rendered as “week.” This has led to all sorts of proposals, one being that “first of [the] sabbaths” is not really the Marys arriving at the tomb on Sunday morning, but instead them arriving at the tomb on the first Sabbath of the counting of the *omer* toward *Shavuot*. While this might sound good at first glance, it fails to take into consideration the flexibility of uses that not only the Greek *sabbaton* possesses, but also its Hebrew progenitor *Shabbat* (שַׁבָּת).

Within the instructions about the counting of the *omer*, Leviticus 23:15 says that it is to involve “seven complete sabbaths” (NASU) or *sheva Shabbatot temimot* (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת). Later in Leviticus 25, though, we see that Jubilee years are determined by a count of “seven sabbaths of years” (Leviticus 25:8, NASU) or *sheva shabbatot shanim* (שִׁבְעַת שַׁבְּתוֹת שָׁנִים...). This latter usage of “sabbath” very clearly means “seven weeks of years” (RSV, NRSV, NJPS, ESV), just as the actual counting of the *omer* toward *Shavuot* is not determined by the weekly Sabbath, but actually periods of seven-day weeks (cf. Deuteronomy 16:9).⁷ Lexically speaking, one finds how the term *Shabbat*, while frequently meaning “day of rest, sabbath,” can also as the plural *Shabbatot* mean “weeks” (*CHALOT*).⁸

When the Hebrew Tanach was translated into Greek, the only term really available at the translators’ disposal for the concept of “week” for the Septuagint was *hebdomas* (ἑβδομάς), simply meaning “the number seven or a number of seven” (LS, Leviticus 23:15 and 25:8, LXX).⁹ By the First Century, though, the Hebrew loan word *sabbaton* (σαββάτου) was used in the Greek-speaking Jewish community, with very much the same flexibility as *Shabbat*. “[T]he Greek term *sábbaton*...[was used] in the diaspora. The plural *tá sábbata* may mean one sabbath, several sabbaths, or the whole week (like the Hebrew term)” (*TDNT*).¹⁰

While it may seem odd to us today, the term “Sabbath” to a First Century Jew could mean “week,” and it is in various places used in precisely this way. In Luke 18:12, for example, we see a Jewish person say “I fast twice a week,” *nēsteuō dis tou sabbatou* (νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου), which would literally be “I fast twice on the sabbath” (LITV)—but this really makes no sense as fasting typically lasts an entire day or longer (a period of not eating between breakfast and supper can hardly be regarded as a “fast”), and so the translation of *sabbatou* as “week” is justified. In the *Didache*, from the late First Century C.E., it is said that the Jews “fast on the second and the fifth day of the week” (8:1), *deutera sabbatōn kai pemptē* (δευτέρα σαββάτων καὶ πέμπτη), meaning twice a week.¹¹ Here, the plural *sabbatōn* or “sabbaths” is used. It here likewise has to represent the “week,” as it would again make no sense for one to fast two times on the Sabbath day or Saturday.

⁶ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 645.

⁷ Note how most versions render *sheva Shabbatot temimot* in Leviticus 23:15 as “seven full weeks” or something close (RSV, NIV, NRSV, ATS, NJPS, ESV, HCSB, CJB, et. al.).

⁸ *CHALOT*, 360.

⁹ LS, 220.

¹⁰ E. Lohse, “*sábbaton*,” in *TDNT*, 989.

¹¹ Cf. *BDAG*, 910.

What would have been the highlight for the ancient Jewish week? *The Sabbath occurring every seven days*. So, should we be too surprised that the “Sabbath” also affects the terminology “week”? As John Nolland accounts, the dual usage of *sabbaton* in Matthew 28:1 is not irregular: “there can be no doubt about the sense—[as it] uses *sa,bbata* for ‘sabbath’...in its first use and for ‘week’ in its second use.”¹² It stands justified to recognize that the Marys did arrive at Yeshua’s tomb on Sunday morning. But, simply because they arrived at the tomb on Sunday morning **by no means indicates that the seventh-day Sabbath has somehow been Divinely transferred to Sunday or invalidated**, and neither does it mean that Yeshua’s resurrection has somehow validated the Saddusaical reckoning of the counting of the *omer* which began on a Sunday.¹³ All this means is that the Marys arrived at the gravesite to anoint Yeshua’s body as soon as they could, and Sunday morning—following the delaying earthquake when everything was safe—was the earliest time.

¹² Nolland, 1244 fn#3.

¹³ Consult the FAQ, “*Omer Count*.”