

The Sabbath in Matthew 28:1¹

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Background

NIV translates Matt 28:1 as follows: "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week [*eis mian sabbatōn*], Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb." Some interpret the words "on the first day of the week" to mean, "on the first of the [Christian] Sabbaths," basing their argument on the Greek. Thus the Sabbath following the crucifixion was the last of the Jewish Sabbaths and this is followed immediately by the new Christian Sabbath, i.e., Sunday. Thus no historical process accompanies the transition from worshipping on the seventh day to worshipping on the first day. No published translation that I know of supports this view, and one could ask why in this model the Sabbath before the crucifixion would not be considered the last of the old Jewish Sabbaths, if this is the type of meaning the text is trying to convey. In any event, below I argue that "the first day of the week" is a correct translation which simply means that Mary came to the tomb early Sunday morning.

Grammar

The Greek word for "Sabbath" is often plural, even when it has singular meaning. There is a historical reason for this. Understanding the way the word developed over time will help us to explain Matt 28:1, where some would like to say the meaning is, "first of the [Christian] Sabbaths." Actually it simply means "first day of the week." Here's why.

The Hebrew word for "Sabbath" is *šabbat*. The Aramaic word for "Sabbath" was the same, i.e., *šabbat*. But in Aramaic there was more of a tendency to include the definite article ("the") on words that in Hebrew would not require it. The article in Hebrew comes before the word it modifies, while the article in Aramaic comes after the word it modifies. Both mean "the Sabbath," but the article is attached differently. So the Hebrew word, with article, was *haššabbat* and the Aramaic word was *šabbatā*². See table 1.

Table 1
The Hebrew and Aramaic Words for "Sabbath"

Language	Article	Word	Article
Hebrew	ha(š) +	šabbat	
Aramaic		šabbat	+ ā ²

¹ The present paper was previously titled, "Brief Note: Why Is the Greek Word for 'Sabbath' Often Plural?"

Greek nouns come in one of three genders – masculine, feminine, and neuter. We'll focus on neuter plurals. (Trust me, there's a reason for going through all of this.) The following three examples are taken at random from Matt 27. See table 2.

Table 2
Some Examples of Greek Neuter Plural Nouns

Reference	Greek Form	Gloss in Context	Literal Gloss
Matt 27:5, 6	ta arguria	"the coins"	"the silvers"
Matt 27:25	ta tekna	"the disciples"	"the children"
Matt 27:31, 35	ta himatia	"the robe"	"the garments"

Notice that each of the Greek forms above ends with an [a] sound and that the Aramaic word for Sabbath ends with an [a] sound. Jews spoke Aramaic before they spoke Greek. During their exile in Babylon they learned Aramaic and brought it home with them on their return. The language Jesus grew up with was a down home dialect of Aramaic. So when people said "Sabbath" in Aramaic (more often "the Sabbath") it carries over into Greek as *sabbata*.

The important point to notice is that Greek words of this form are normally neuter plurals, which is how the word is used in 19 of the 59 cases where a form of the Greek word *sabbata* is translated "Sabbath."² The definite article for neuter plural nominatives in Greek is *ta*, as in the examples above. Thus, *ta sabbata*. The corresponding plural genitive is *tōn sabbatōn*. There are other forms, but they do not figure prominently in our list of examples. The problem is that when we look back at all of this from a remove of some 2000 years we see *ta sabbata* and assume that the form is neuter plural, but we're going to miss something of what is actually involved if we don't know the history of the form we're examining.

Application

Matthew 28

In Matt 28:1 the question is why the word translated "Sabbath" or "week" should be plural, and for that matter why it should be translated in two different ways ("Sabbath" and "week"). There are reasons for both of these facts, but the explanation involves linguistic questions that would not capture everyone's interest. For now, however, notice that the wording in Matt 28:1 and the wording in Acts 20:7 is virtually identical. In English it *is* identical ("on the first day of the week" in both passages), and in Greek it is fully equivalent (*eis mian sabbatōn* [Matt 28:1]; *tē mia tōn sabbatōn* [Acts 20:7]).

² The distribution is as follows: Singular forms are rendered "Sabbath" 40 times in the New Testament, singular forms are rendered "week" three times, plural forms are rendered "Sabbath" or "Sabbaths" 19 times, and plural forms are rendered "week" six times. Context must be taken into account to determine what shade of meaning the writer intended..

Eis mian is an accusative construction, while *tē mia* is dative. Both mean substantially the same thing, i.e., "on [day] one." *Sabbatōn* is a genitive that means "of [the] Sabbath." If you're a first century Jew and you're counting days starting from the Sabbath – as everyone did – the first one you come to is going to be Sunday, the first day of the week. (Sabbath was, and still is, the last day of the week.)

Table 3
The Greek Words Used in Matt 28:1 and Acts 20:7

Reference	Number ("One")	Word for "Week"
Matt 28:1	mian (accusative)	sabbatōn (genitive)
Acts 20:7	mia (dative)	sabbatōn (genitive)

In both cases the phrase means "[day] one of [=from] the Sabbath." Idiomatically we could translate, "[day] one after the Sabbath." For the most part Jews did not name the days of the week. Instead they used numbers. Friday is an exception. It was called "Preparation" (see John 19:31, 42). In Mark 15:42 it is called *prosabbaton*, i.e., "[Day] Before Sabbath." Because the Sabbath brought each week to a close, and was the most prominent feature of each weekly cycle, the word "Sabbath" came to be identified with "week."³ Notice that the word *mia* means "one." It doesn't really mean "first," although it is true that the day immediately following Sabbath is the first day after the Sabbath. So in context it is not wrong to say "first," but we just shouldn't give the word more significance that it has. The literal meaning is "one."

My point here is that if *eis mian sabbatōn* means "first of the [Christian] Sabbaths" in Matt 28:1, *tē mia tōn sabbatōn* would also have to mean "first of the [Christian] Sabbaths" in Acts 20:7. But how can there be two *first* Christian "Sabbaths" a quarter of a century apart? So that's not the explanation. Instead, Matt 28:1 simply means that Mary came to the tomb early Sunday morning. The translations have this one right.

The Didache

There's an interesting little sidelight to this discussion in an early Christian document called the Didache. It contains only 16 short chapters, but is important in church history because it comes down to us from the second century. Here's chapter 8 in the Roberts-Donaldson translation (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>):

Chapter 8. Fasting and Prayer (the Lord's Prayer). But let not your fasts be with the hypocrites, for they fast on the second and fifth day of the week. Rather, fast on the fourth day and the Preparation (Friday). Do not pray like the hypocrites, but rather as the Lord commanded in His Gospel, like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us today our

³ This was not the only way to say "week," but it was the one used most often in the New Testament. Greeks who had no association with Jews, and Jews whose associations were primarily with Greeks, such as Philo and Josephus, used the word *hebomad* to mean "week." And this, in turn, is a fact we should bear in mind when interpreting Dan 9:24-27.

daily (needful) bread, and forgive us our debt as we also forgive our debtors. And bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (or, evil); for Thine is the power and the glory for ever. Pray this three times each day.

The "hypocrites" (i.e., Jews) fast on "the second and fifth day of the week" (*deutera sabbatōn kai pentē*). Christians are not to imitate this example. They are to fast on "the fourth day and the Preparation" (*tetrada kai paraskeuēn*). The reference is to Monday and Thursday, Wednesday and Friday, but the days are not named. Except for the sixth day (Preparation) and the seventh (Sabbath), Jews and early Christians alike did not name the days of the week but numbered them – counting from the Sabbath. When it says "the first day of the week" (*eis mian sabbatōn*) in Matt 28:1, this is part of the context for saying so. "First day of the week" simply means Sunday.