

No Solid Biblical Basis for Sunday Worship

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SUNDAY is the day of worship for the vast majority of Christians. Many suppose that Jesus Himself changed the day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday, or at least that the change has some apostolic authority. The usual reason offered is that Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday. Even some scholarly sources claim that there is apostolic authority for weekly observance of Sunday. For example the Catholic encyclopedia states:

“Sunday was the first day of the week according to the Jewish method of reckoning, but for Christians it began to take the place of the Jewish Sabbath in Apostolic times as the day set apart for the public and solemn worship of God. The practice of meeting together on the first day of the week for the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is indicated in Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; in Apocalypse 1:10, it is called the Lord’s day.”¹

But is this really true? As the above quote shows, the basis for the belief that the New Testament endorses Sunday worship centers on three passages – Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, and Revelation 1:10. The last of these simply mentions “*the Lord’s Day*” without defining it in any way. A very good case can be made that this clause refers to the Sabbath day, originating from statements in both the prophets and by Jesus Himself: “*If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day,*”² and Jesus’ comment, “*Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.*”³ Furthermore, if John used the clause “*the Lord’s Day*” as a specific Christian holiday apart from the Sabbath, it would almost certainly refer to the annual celebration of His Resurrection Day rather than a weekly one (any given Sunday). In any case, since the clause is not defined further, either in this context or anywhere in Scripture,⁴ it hardly provides evidence that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday by either Jesus’ authority or that of the Apostles, or even that a change occurred in apostolic times.

The other two passages, however, are claimed as evidence for Sunday worship based entirely on the perceived meaning of the Greek clause τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων,

¹ Catholic Encyclopedia article on “Sunday,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14335a.htm>

² Isaiah 58:13

³ Mark 2:28

⁴ That the early Christians in the following centuries used this as a title for Sunday cannot shed light on John’s usage. It is wrong to read later interpretations back into the Scriptures. Rather, only prior or contemporaneous usage by inspired writers would be relevant.

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translated “the first day of the week” in our English Bibles. The difficulty, however, is that the word σαββάτων (sabbaton) is actually “Sabbath” (the seventh day) not “week” (a period of seven days). In fact, this is not a Greek word at all, but rather a transliteration of the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (Shabbat) using Greek letters. It originated as a transliteration among Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora, and is found many times in the Septuagint. Unless a Greek-speaking reader was familiar with the Septuagint while reading the New Testament, or was at least conversant with Greek-speaking Jews who used the Septuagint as their Bible, he would have absolutely no idea what the word σαββάτων meant in the New Testament. It would be a foreign word to him. He could pronounce it, but would not understand it. Consequently, understanding the clause τῇ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων in the New Testament first requires knowledge of the manner in which the transliterated word σαββάτων was used by the Septuagint translators to convey the meaning of the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (Shabbat).

The Term “Sabbath” in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word is the noun form of the verb that means “cease” (as in resting from labors). So, it literally means “a ceasing” (in the singular) and “ceasings” (in the plural). There are words in the Greek language that mean “cease,” such as the verb παύω⁵ or the nouns κατάπαυσις⁶ or ἀνάπαυσις,⁷ both of which are used in Exodus 35:2 in reference to the Sabbath. So, the LXX translators could have used these consistently. However, the real reason they chose to invent a new word by transliterating the Hebrew is most likely because of the repetition of “Shabbat” in the Hebrew Bible. For example:

Exodus 35:2 NKJV

2 “Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh day shall be a holy day for you, a Sabbath (shabbat) of rest (shabbat) to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.

Notice that the English translators also transliterated the first Hebrew word “shabbat” as “Sabbath,” but translated the second occurrence as “rest.” The Septuagint translators did something similar when translating the Hebrew to Greek.

Exodus 35:2 LXX

*2 ἕξ ἡμέρας ποιήσεις ἔργα τῇ δὲ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἐβδόμῃ **κατάπαυσις** ἅγιον **σάββατα ἀνάπαυσις** κυρίῳ πᾶς ὁ ποιῶν ἔργον ἐν αὐτῇ τελευτάτω*

⁵ Strong's #G3973

⁶ Strong's #G2663

⁷ Strong's #G372

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Six days shalt thou perform works, but on the seventh day shall be rest [κατάπαυσις] – a holy Sabbath [σάββατα] – a rest [ἀνάπαυσις] for the Lord: every one that does work on it, let him die.⁸

What both our English translation of the Hebrew and the Septuagint's Greek translation of the Hebrew imply is this: The normal word in Hebrew for "rest" or "ceasing" had become a proper noun – a title for the seventh day – in the Hebrew Bible. Because of this, confusion can sometimes result when the word "shabbat" is used in a generic sense (as to rest) versus when it is used as a title for the seventh day. (There was no capitalization of proper nouns in Hebrew to make such a distinction).

In English, the word "Sabbath" is also a transliteration, just as in Greek. But in our English Old Testament it is distinguished from the common words meaning "cease" or "rest" so that we are aware that it is a title. That is, when "shabbat" refers to the seventh day it is transliterated (and capitalized in the NKJV). But when the same Hebrew word is used generically it is translated as "rest" or "cease." In the same way the Septuagint translators chose to transliterate the Hebrew "Shabbat" as σαββάτον whenever it refers specifically to the Sabbath day(s). Thus, σαββάτον in the LXX is always a title for the seventh day, and is not normally used to translate the Hebrew "shabbat" when it is used generically. Consequently, the Hebrew word שַׁבָּת (shabbat) is found many more times in the Hebrew Bible than σαββάτον can be found in the LXX. The obvious implication for our study is that the use of the Greek σαββάτον in the New Testament follows the Septuagint pattern, and is always a proper noun (and therefore should be capitalized in English as in the NKJV) rather than being a generic noun with a similar meaning as the Hebrew "shabbat."

Compounding the difficulty is that the LXX usually has σαββάτον (Sabbath) in the plural σαββάτα (Sabbaths) when in fact the context clearly indicates it refers to a single day. For example, Exodus 20:8 states, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." The LXX has "μνήσθητι τὴν ἡμέραν τῶν σαββάτων ἀγιάζειν αὐτήν." Literally, it is "the day of the Sabbaths." Day is singular but Sabbaths is plural. The usage of the plural for the singular in the LXX according to Kittle's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament was not the original intent of the LXX translators. Rather, "σαββάτα was not originally a plural; it is simply the Hebrew 'sabbat'; the α is from the outset a purely vocal addition to reproduce the Hebrew –t in Greek. ... In practical usage, however, τὰ σάββατα was then assimilated to the comprehensive plural of Greek festivals."⁹

⁸ Brenton's English Translation of the LXX, Greek insertions mine

⁹ Kittle, TDNT, Vol. VII, p. 7, footnote 39 [Filled out abbreviations are mine]

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The New Testament writers did not, however, arbitrarily use the plural form, even though it may appear so at first glance. When it is plural, there is a reason. For example, we have Jesus' disciples walking through a grain field and plucking grain to eat τοῖς σάββασιν ("on the Sabbaths"),¹⁰ while the context seems to indicate a singular Sabbath day. However, Luke's parallel account explains. "Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that He went through the grainfields." The critical clause is ἐν σαββάτῳ δευτεροπρώτῳ¹¹ (in the Sabbath (singular), the second from the first). Many commentators struggle to understand what "the second from the first" means here. Yet, when we consider the Jewish feast calendar, this is a reference to the second Sabbath¹² day among the seven-Sabbaths countdown to Pentecost.¹³ Matthew's account should be rendered: "At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbaths," referring to the seven-Sabbaths (50-day) countdown to Pentecost. Luke's parallel account tells us which of the seven Sabbaths this was – the second.

In other cases where our English translations have "Sabbath" (singular) yet the Greek has the plural form, a closer look indicates that the plural was indeed meant. For example, in Luke 4:16 we have this: "He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read." "Sabbath" is plural here, not singular as in our English translations. The text makes good sense that He was doing the readings on more than one consecutive Sabbath, since this was portrayed as His "custom."

Similarly, in Luke 4:31 we have this: "And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And He was teaching them on the Sabbath." Here again, "Sabbath" is plural in the Greek text. However, note the words "was teaching" ἦν διδάσκων. The verb translated "was" (ἦν) is in the imperfect tense, which requires ongoing past action over a period of time rather than a single event. Consequently, Jesus was teaching at Capernaum for two or more consecutive Sabbath days.

Again, when Paul visited Antioch of Pisidia, he "went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down." The Greek reads "τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων" (literally, "the day of the Sabbaths"). There is no reason to suppose that Paul did not do this for consecutive Sabbaths, and that Paul's following teaching took place over more than one Sabbath. The rest of the New Testament should be treated the same way, rendering the plural

¹⁰ Matt. 12:1

¹¹ δευτεροπρώτῳ appears in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts, but is omitted in a few others. It is contained in the Latin mss.

¹² This is also the day that Psalm 48:1 LXX refers to as δευτέρᾳ σαββάτου (for the second Sabbath).

¹³ Lev. 23:15-16

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form as “Sabbaths” and the singular as “Sabbath.” Every time the plural is used, there seems to be a valid reason. Consequently, there are quite a few places where our English translations are in error by rendering “Sabbaths” as “Sabbath.”

The Practice of New Testament Writers

Given that the σαββάτον is not a Greek word, but a transliteration, and that its use in the Septuagint was exclusively as a proper noun for the Sabbath day(s), we would expect the New Testament writers to use it the same way. Why then do our English Bibles translate σαββάτον as “Sabbath” except when it appears in the clause τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων (“the first [day] of the Sabbaths”)? Nowhere else in the Bible, either in the Hebrew Old Testament or in the Septuagint does “Sabbath” mean “week.”¹⁴ In all cases it refers to the seventh day(s). The Septuagint always has ἑβδομάδες (ebdomades – a group of seven) for “week,” translating the Hebrew שַׁבּוּעַ (shabuwa).

The claim that “Sabbath” is used for “week” in the New Testament is justified from Luke 18:12 where the Pharisee boasts in prayer, “*I fast twice a week.*” The clause is νηστεύω δις τοῦ σαββάτου. However, if we do not impose an entirely new meaning on the term “Sabbath,” this statement says, “*I fast twice of the Sabbath.*” That is, he ate only one meal on the Sabbath day¹⁵ instead of the usual three. Consequently, this statement provides no basis or precedent for the above assumption by linguists or translators that σαββάτον in the New Testament can mean “week” because it makes perfect sense translating it in the usual way as a proper noun referring to the Sabbath day.

For the New Testament writers, if they followed precedent from either the Hebrew Bible or the Greek Old Testament, in no case would they have used the word “Sabbath” in reference to the whole week. If they meant “Sabbath” as a proper noun they had available the Greek (transliterated) word σαββάτον. If they meant “week” they had available the Greek word ἑβδομάδες (group of seven days) found repeatedly in the

¹⁴ In the Babylonian Talmud the Hebrew word “Shabbat” is used (arguably) in one section for the whole week, referring to numbered days counting down to the Sabbath. However, there are no examples of שַׁבּוּעַ (Shabbat) being used for “week” in the Hebrew Bible, nor are there any examples where the transliterated Greek word σαββάτον is used for “week” in the LXX.

¹⁵ It is often claimed that the Jews did not fast on the Sabbath. However, Pseudo-Ignatius’ Epistle to the Philippians shows otherwise. “*If any one fasts on the Lord’s Day or on the Sabbath, except on the paschal Sabbath only, he is a murderer of Christ.” (ch. xiii). The term “murderer of Christ” in the Pseudo-Ignatian Epistles referred exclusively to Jews (cf. To Hero, ch. ii). The writer associated those who fast on the Sabbath (or the anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection) as a Jew, of those whom he considered “murderers of Christ.” This shows that Jews did indeed fast on the Sabbath, and some seem to have fasted on the anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection (First-fruits) in opposition to the rejoicing of Christians. See also the following article for more information concerning ancient pious Jews fasting on the Sabbath to devote to Torah study, as an act of devotion: http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/021031_SabbathFast.html*

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Septuagint. There is no basis, either in the Hebrew Bible or in the Septuagint, for understanding either שַׁבָּת (Shabbat) or σαββάτων (Sabbath) as a whole week.

We are now faced with the clause used in all four Gospels concerning the day of Jesus' resurrection.¹⁶ As stated earlier, our English translations render it as *"the first day of the week."* But τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων literally means *"the first [day] of the Sabbaths."* The Gospels only use this clause in reference to the actual day of Jesus' resurrection, never in reference to any other time. The fact that Jesus arose on a Sunday, and this particular Sunday was called τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων, only provides precedent for calling Resurrection Sunday τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων,¹⁷ not any other Sunday.

We know from the Gospel accounts that Jesus was crucified the morning after eating the Passover meal with His disciples.¹⁸ The Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth of Nisan, immediately preceding the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread which began on the fifteenth.¹⁹ Within the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, the First-fruits offering of the barley harvest was always to be presented on Sunday, the day following the weekly Sabbath. *"And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the LORD; seven days you must eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall have a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it. But you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD for seven days. The seventh day shall be a holy convocation; you shall do no customary work on it." ... [T]hen you shall bring **a sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest** to the priest. He shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted on your behalf; **on the day after the Sabbath** the priest shall wave it."*²⁰ The day after the Sabbath is of course a Sunday. So the First-fruits offering always fell on the Sunday within the seven days of Unleavened Bread. It was on this Sunday that Jesus rose from the dead. This is why Paul referred to Jesus' resurrection as the "First-fruits" of our resurrection.²¹ The reason

¹⁶ Matt. 28:1; Mar. 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1,19

¹⁷ A different clause appears in Mark 16:9. This is the opening clause of a hotly disputed passage among textual scholars, because verses 9-20 do not appear in the early manuscripts. Textual scholars argue that the passage is a later addition based on its absence from the earliest manuscripts as well as its markedly different style from the rest of Mark. Others argue for its originality with Mark. In the later manuscripts that contain these verses, this clause reads "πρώτη σαββάτου" (first of Sabbath – singular) and in others such as m-1141 it reads "πρώτη σαββάτων" (first of Sabbaths – plural). The word πρώτη (before-most) is used instead of μιᾷ (the cardinal number one) found in the other passages we are examining. In the fourth century, Eusebius argued that verses 9ff were not in the "correct" copies which were in the majority in his day. (Eusebius, Gospel Problems and Solutions, To Marinus, I:iii). Because of these great uncertainties regarding the exact wording of Mark 16:9, we have omitted it from consideration.

¹⁸ Luke 22:15

¹⁹ Ex. 12:6-20; Ex. 23:15; Lev. 23:5-6

²⁰ Lev 23:6-11

²¹ 1 Cor. 15:20,23

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the New Testament writers referred to the day of Jesus' resurrection as τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων becomes obvious from the words that immediately follow.

Lev. 23:15-16

15 'And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering [First-fruits]: seven Sabbaths [plural] shall be completed.

16 'Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD.


The Feast of Pentecost means "Fiftieth Day." It occurs on the fiftieth day counting from the day that the First-fruits offering was made on the day following the Sabbath within the seven days of Unleavened Bread. These festivals formed bookends separated by the seven weeks countdown. The countdown was of the passing of seven Sabbath days, seven full weeks (49 days) from Firstfruits. Pentecost was the fiftieth day from Firstfruits. Consequently, **Firstfruits was always "day one" of the seven-week (seven Sabbaths) countdown to Pentecost.** Greek-speaking Jews understood the clause τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων ([day] one of the Sabbaths) as a title for First-fruits.

The year of Jesus' crucifixion Passover fell on a Friday, the fourteenth of Nisan (beginning just after sunset on Thursday night). They ate the Passover in the late hours of evening. Jesus was arrested near midnight, and stood trial in the early hours of the morning of the fourteenth and was crucified shortly after dawn. He expired at 3pm on the 14th, and was hurriedly buried before sunset because the Sabbath was beginning. John informs us that "that Sabbath was a high day,"²² meaning it was both the weekly Sabbath and the first day of Unleavened Bread, so there was a double command to rest.²³ Jesus arose just before dawn on Sunday, on First-fruits, after personally keeping the Sabbath "rest" in the tomb. Firstfruits was called by the Greek speaking Jews τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων – "the first [day] of the [seven] Sabbaths," counting down to Pentecost. Thus, by using this clause in reference to Jesus' resurrection, the Gospel writers linked Jesus' resurrection with the Feast Day. Μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων came only once a year. This became the official Christian title for the anniversary of Jesus' resurrection.

²² John 19:31

²³ Lev. 23:3,6-7

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τῆ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων The First of the Sabbaths						
Night 1 Day	Night 2 Day	Night 3 Day	Night 4 Day	Night 5 Day	Night 6 Day	Night 7 Day
24	25	26	27	28	29	7/1 Nisan 1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	 14	15 ULB1
1  16 ULB2	2 17 ULB3	3 18 ULB4	4 19 ULB5	5 20 ULB6	6 21 ULB7	7 1st Sabbath 22
8 23	9 24	10 25	11 26	12 27	13 28	14 2nd Sabbath 29
15 30	 8/2 Iyar 1	17 2	18 3	19 4	20 5	21 3rd Sabbath 6
22 7	23 8	24 9	25 10	26 11	27 12	28 4th Sabbath 13
29 14	30 15	31 16	32 17	33 18	34 19	35 5th Sabbath 20
36 21	37 22	38 23	39 24	40 25	41 26	42 6th Sabbath 27
43 28	44 29	 9/3 Sivan 1	46 2	47 3	48 4	49 7th Sabbath 5
 50 6	7	8	9	10	11	12

The Sabbaths

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Jesus observed the Passover with His disciples at the beginning of the 14th (just after sunset of the 13th). He was crucified after dawn on the 14th, which was also the “Preparation” for the Sabbath. He arose on τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων, the 16th of Nisan.

There is early Christian confirmation of these facts from the second century.

*“Accordingly, in the years gone by, Jesus went to eat the Passover sacrificed by the Jews, keeping the feast. But when he had preached He who was the Passover, the Lamb of God, led as a sheep to the slaughter, presently taught His disciples the mystery of the type on **the thirteenth day**, on which also they inquired, “Where wilt Thou that we prepare for Thee to eat the Passover?” It was on this day, then, that both the consecration of the unleavened bread and the preparation for the feast took place. Whence John naturally describes the disciples as already previously prepared to have their feet washed by the Lord. And on the following day our Savior suffered, He who was the Passover, propitiously sacrificed by the Jews. Suitably, therefore, to **the fourteenth day**, on which He also suffered, in the morning, the chief priests and the scribes, who brought Him to Pilate, did not enter the Praetorium, that they might not be defiled, but might freely eat the Passover in the evening. With this precise determination of the days both the whole Scriptures agree, and the Gospels harmonize. **The resurrection also attests it. He certainly rose on the third day, which fell on the first day of the weeks of harvest, on which the law prescribed that the priest should offer up the sheaf.**”²⁴*

Notice the clause, “on the first day of the weeks of harvest” (plural) which Clement understood from the clause in the Gospels τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων. This is sufficient proof that not only WOULD the Gospel writers use this terminology exclusively for the day of First-fruits, but that **the earliest Christians understood this clause as an annual reference** based on the Festival calendar, not as a weekly occurrence (any given Sunday).

At first glance, Matthew’s account of the resurrection seems to present a problem. Matthew 28:1 reads: Ὅψε δὲ **σαββάτων**, τῆ ἐπιφωσκούση εἰς μίαν **σαββάτων**. The NKJV translates this as: “Now **after the Sabbath**, as the first day of the week began to dawn ...” But both occurrences of the word “Sabbath” are plural. So how could the “Sabbaths” be past yet it was “the first day of the Sabbaths?” What “Sabbaths” (plural) were past? The problem, however, is the incorrect translation of the word ὀψέ as though it was a preposition meaning “after,” when in reality it means “evening.” To illustrate this, consider Mark 13:35 where Jesus said, “Watch therefore, for you do not know

²⁴ Fragments of Clement of Alexandria, From the Last Work on the Passover, Ante Nicene Fathers (Roberts and Donaldson, Hendrickson Pub. 1994), Vol. II, pp. 1228-1229.

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when the master of the house is coming – in the *evening* [ὄψέ], at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning.” Note the order, where “evening” was listed first in sequence. This is because according to Jewish reckoning the calendar date changes at sunset. Thus even in the creation account, “the evening and the morning” make up a calendar day. Consequently, the Jewish readers of Matthew’s Gospel would not have understood “evening” to be the end of a calendar day but rather the extreme beginning of a new calendar day. And this was especially important regarding the ritual observance of days, including the weekly Sabbath, as is apparent from the fact that the bodies must be entombed before sunset when the Sabbath-eve began. Matthew should have been translated as follows: “But of Sabbaths-eve, in the dawning of the first [day] of the Sabbaths ...” Here “Sabbaths-eve” points to the very beginning of the 50-day period of seven Sabbaths, the countdown to Pentecost. And the next statement restates and clarifies that “Sabbaths eve” was in fact “the first [day] of the Sabbaths.” According to John Gill’s commentary, “the Vulgate Latin, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions, and Munster’s Hebrew Gospel render it, ‘the evening of the sabbath’; and the Persic version, ‘the night of the Sabbath.’” Gill then struggled to interpret the statement because of his failure to understand the twice-plural “Sabbaths” (σαββάτων), not as a reference to a single Sabbath day, but as a reference to the 7-Sabbath (50-day) countdown to Pentecost. Understanding both occurrences of σαββάτων as plural (as it actually is), and thus referring to this 50-day period, resolves the difficulty.²⁵

The Anniversary of Jesus’ Resurrection as μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων

In addition to the five occurrences of this clause in the Gospels, all in reference to Jesus’ Resurrection Day, the remaining two occurrences are both associated with Paul’s ministry. Our default assumption, as we examine the last two occurrences of this clause, ought to be that it was used exactly with the same sense as in the Gospels. It is also worth noting the connection made by Paul between Jesus’ crucifixion and the Passover, and His resurrection and First-fruits.

²⁵ Other commentators have struggled with this statement as well. For example, A.T. Robertson (Word Pictures) translates it as: “Now late on the sabbath as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week,” and then concludes, “This careful chronological statement according to Jewish days clearly means that before the sabbath was over, that is before six p.m., this visit by the women was made ‘to see the sepulcher.’ ... Allen thinks that Matthew misunderstands Mark at this point, but clearly Mark is speaking of sunrise and Matthew of sunset. Why allow only one visit for the anxious women?” So according to Robertson, the apparent conflict this statement introduces with Matthew is resolved by claiming they were speaking of the women making two different trips to the tomb with their spices! All of this difficulty is simply because these commentators and translators failed to understand that the plural “Sabbaths” referred to the 7-Sabbath countdown to Pentecost, which began on the feast of First-fruits, a Sunday.

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1 Cor. 5:6-8

6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed **Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.** 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 Cor. 15:20-23

20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become **the firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: **Christ the firstfruits**, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming.

Paul's Mission

Both of the occurrences of the clause τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων are found within the context of Paul's executing a plan to take up a one-time collection from the Gentile assemblies in order to assist the persecuted believers at Jerusalem. While previously attending one of the Feasts²⁶ with the Jerusalem assembly, Paul became aware of the dire situation of the Jerusalem believers who had fallen under intense persecution. As he left Jerusalem to embark on his third missionary journey, Paul purposed to collect from the Gentile Christian assemblies under his care a large donation to assist the Jerusalem believers. As Paul passed through the region of Galatia on his way toward Ephesus,²⁷ he gave the Galatian assemblies specific oral instructions to set aside a donation for the believers at Jerusalem. After arriving at his destination in Ephesus, Paul then wrote ahead to the Corinthians, to whom he had determined to visit, with the exact same instructions.

1 Cor. 16:1-8

1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, **as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia**, so you must do also: 2 [Κατὰ μίαν σαββάτων²⁸ – According to first

²⁶ Acts 18:21

²⁷ Acts 18:23

²⁸ The vast majority of Greek manuscripts have this reading, with σαββάτων – genitive plural. However, the fourth century uncial Vaticanus has σαββάτου – genitive singular. Yet, the text has been clearly altered here as photos of the manuscript show, with the line of text erased and rewritten (residue of smudges have been replaced with new text). Sinaiticus has the genitive plural σαββάτων, but includes a correction (addition of ν to σαββάτω), correcting the copy from dative singular to genitive plural. That the original scribe of this manuscript accidentally forgot the final ν (which was then corrected by adding it in the space above) is apparent since the dative singular would not make much sense in the text –

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{day} of Sabbaths] *let each one of you **lay something aside, storing up** as he may prosper, that **there be no collections when I come.** 3 And **when I come**, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. 4 But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me. 5 Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia). 6 And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. 7 For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits. 8 But **I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost.***

It is clear from the context that Paul's instructions for laying up in store a donation was not a regular event, but a one-time event, something that he would be coming to collect from them. Paul instructed them to set aside their donations on "*the first day of the Sabbaths.*" This was the day when the Christian assemblies met to celebrate Jesus' resurrection-day annually, corresponding with the Jewish feast of First-fruits. Paul wanted them to set aside their donation on this very special day on both the Jewish and Christian calendars. Implicit in this statement was that their donation should be in honor of Jesus' resurrection. He made it clear that he wanted all collections to be completed before he arrived in Corinth. This indicates that the collections would not continue after his arrival, proving that Paul was not referring to regular weekly giving in their common assembly. He next stated that he would wait in Ephesus (from where he wrote this letter) until Pentecost. This statement shows the time of year when he wrote this, that it was significantly before Pentecost, since he expected his letter to be carried all the way to Corinth from Ephesus, and to give them time to comply.

After Pentecost, Paul left Ephesus and passed through Macedonia on his way to Corinth in Achaia (southern Greece). Along the way, Paul also collected the donations from Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea,²⁹ showing that the same instructions had been forwarded to these assemblies ahead of his visit. We therefore have the Galatian assemblies, the Macedonian assemblies, and the Corinthian assembly all "laying aside" their donations on First-fruits during Passover week, on the anniversary of Jesus' resurrection.

After arriving and spending the winter at Corinth, Paul was made aware of a Jewish plot to attack his team on their return trip, most likely to steal the large donations they

literally, "first day IN the Sabbath." Corrections of this kind are common after the manuscript is proof-read for mistakes.

²⁹ 2 Cor. 8:1-4 That the donations mentioned were collected from these assemblies is shown by the fact that a member from each accompanied Paul to deliver the donation to Jerusalem – Acts 20:4.

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were transporting.³⁰ So, rather than traveling from Greece by ship to his home assembly in Antioch, and from there to Jerusalem, Paul instead decided to retrace his path on foot back through Macedonia to Philippi where he would then catch a ship to Troas in Asia Minor, and then work his way along the Mediterranean coast back to Jerusalem.

As Paul and his team approached Philippi, he sent most of his companions on ahead to catch a ship from Philippi to Troas (most likely carrying the donations with them). By this time it was early spring, and the Passover was at hand. Paul and Luke remained behind in Macedonia to spend the Feast of Unleavened Bread with the assembly in Philippi. This is where we encounter the final New Testament occurrence of the clause “μῦα τῶν σαββάτων” (the first [day] of the Sabbaths).

Acts 20:4-7,11

4 And Sopater of Berea accompanied him to Asia – also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.

5 These men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas.

*6 But we sailed away from Philippi after **the Days of Unleavened Bread**, and in five days joined them at Troas, where we stayed seven days.*

*7 Now on **the first day of the week**, [μῦα τῶν σαββάτων³¹ (the first [day] of the Sabbaths)] when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. ...*

11 Now when he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed.

Having sent most of his team ahead, Paul remained behind in Philippi in order to celebrate the feast of Unleavened Bread with the Philippian assembly³² where he had previously left Luke.³³ Verse 6 is parenthetical, explaining why Paul stayed behind at

³⁰ Acts 20:3

³¹ All Greek copies agree, σαββάτων – genitive plural

³² That the early Christian Gentile assemblies observed a form of the Passover and its seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread which immediately follows is shown from 1 Cor. 5:6-8. Yet, their observance of Passover and Unleavened Bread was not after the manner of the Jews (removing all leaven from their homes), but rather the removal of leaven was taken as an allegory for the purging of sin from the lives of believers. Thus, fasting beforehand became the common practice. From this early practice Roman Catholicism extended this to forty days of Lent. That is, this feast period was an annual time of renewal (cf. Jude 1:12), during which they partook of the Lord’s supper.

³³ That Luke, the author of Acts, remained with Paul is evident from his use of the first person plural, “us” and “we” in vs. 5-6. Paul had originally picked up Luke in Troas on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:8-12), and then left him in Philippi (Acts 17:1 – note the third person pronouns). Upon Paul’s return to Philippi on this occasion to celebrate Unleavened Bread with the Philippians, Paul picked up Luke again to accompany him on his trip to Jerusalem with the donations.

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Philippi.³⁴ Thus verse 7 still refers to what occurred at Philippi as Paul delayed there. Our English translations have, “*Now on the first day of the week.*” But as we have seen, the clause, τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων was a technical term for First-fruits, the day after the weekly Sabbath within the seven days of Unleavened Bread. Consequently, the purpose of Paul’s remaining at Philippi was to gather with the Philippians for Feast, and to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ with them on First-fruits.

During Paul’s lengthy speech, a young man named Eutychus dozed off and fell from the third story window. When the crowd rushed outside, they found him dead. Yet, Paul immediately raised him from the dead. What an astonishing coincidence that the raising of Eutychus from the dead occurred during the celebration of the anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection! After this, they went back upstairs where they “broke bread.”³⁵

The next morning Paul and Luke set sail from Philippi for Troas to join the rest of the team. Since the previous day was μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων (First-fruits) – a Sunday, and since Paul sailed after the Days of Unleavened Bread, that year First-fruits (Sunday) was the last day of the seven-day Feast. Consequently, the Passover was the previous Sunday, and Unleavened Bread began Monday, seven days before Paul and Luke departed.

After rejoining his team at Troas, Paul decided not to get off of the ship at Ephesus. Instead he sent a team member from Miletus to run ahead to and fetch the elders from

³⁴ Verses 7-12 describe what occurred in Philippi during the Days of Unleavened Bread, not what occurred in Troas after Paul and Luke caught up to the rest of his team (as is incorrectly assumed by most commentators). Luke picked up the chronological narrative in vs. 13 that he left off at the end of verse 6. This fact would have been assumed by the first century Christian readers of Acts since they understood the clause μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων to be a technical term for First-fruits, which necessarily occurs during the Days of Unleavened Bread mentioned in vs. 6.

³⁵ Variant readings in the Greek manuscripts appear to reflect the controversy in the early centuries concerning observance of the holidays – the so-called “Easter Controversy.” The assemblies of Asia Minor and elsewhere “broke the loaf” (took communion) annually on Passover (the 14th of Nisan, following a very old tradition from John. Then they celebrated the resurrection on First-fruits a few days later with a regular meal together. However, the assemblies of Rome and Alexandria no longer observed the Passover, fasting during Passion week until the Resurrection day. They instead “broke the loaf” (took communion) on Resurrection Sunday. In Acts 20:7 & 11 the term “break bread” does not have the definite article in the Majority Text which suggests a generic sense, eating a meal together. This would be consistent with having observed the Passover a few days earlier and partaking of communion then. However, a 5th century manuscript (D – Bezae) has the definite article in verse 7 (the breaking of bread) and the Alexandrian Manuscripts (Aleph, A, B) along with (D – Bezae) have the definite article in vs. 11, “broke the bread.” The addition of the definite article implies that this was no ordinary meal and supports the practice in Rome and Alexandria. Please see our article, **The Passover Controversy in the Early Assemblies**, http://www.oasischristianchurch.org/feasts/Passover_controversy.pdf

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Ephesus, to whom he gave a brief address at Miletus. Paul then continued his trip, attempting to reach Jerusalem with the donations in time for Pentecost.

Acts 20:16

*16 For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; **for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.***

At this time, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. In it he explained why he was collecting the donations and delivering them to Jerusalem on Pentecost.³⁶

Romans 15:26-28

26 For it pleased those from Macedonia [northern Greece] and Achaia [southern Greece where Corinth was located] to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.

27 It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.

*28 Therefore, **when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit,** I shall go by way of you to Spain.*

It was important to Paul that believing Gentiles understood their debt to Israel, as sharers in the covenants that God made with Abraham and his Seed.³⁷ But it was also important to him that the Jewish believers at Jerusalem recognized the Gentile Christians as their brothers and equal heirs of the grace of God. In carrying out this dual-purpose plan, Paul made sure that the Gentiles' offering for their Jewish brothers was collected in a manner that the Jewish brethren would certainly appreciate, as a parallel to the commands in the Law of Moses.

Deut. 16:5-10

5 "You may not sacrifice the Passover within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you;

³⁶ This was the collection which Paul had previously instructed the assemblies of Galatia, Macedonia, and Corinth to set aside for him on μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων (the first [day] of the Sabbaths), the day of First-fruits, when they met annually to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They did this on First-fruits (in the spring), Paul left Ephesus after Pentecost (mid-summer), and arrived at Corinth by the onset of winter. After collecting the gift, and spending the winter there, and after staying in Philippi to celebrate the next First-fruits on his return trip, Paul was now determined to make it all the way to Jerusalem in seven weeks to deliver the gift in time for Pentecost, a year and seven weeks from when the donations were set aside by these Gentile assemblies.

³⁷ Eph. 2:10-18

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6 *“but at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide, there you shall sacrifice the Passover at twilight, at the going down of the sun, at the time you came out of Egypt.*

7 *“And you shall roast and eat it in the place which the LORD your God chooses, and in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents.*

8 *“Six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a sacred assembly to the LORD your God. You shall do no work on it.*

9 *“You shall count seven weeks for yourself; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the grain. [counting from First-fruits].*

10 *“Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks [Pentecost] to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you.*

Notice that **the token of the harvest to come** was offered to God on First-fruits (which is when Paul instructed these Gentile assemblies to set aside their donation), but the “freewill offering” was to be **brought to Jerusalem on Pentecost**, seven weeks later. The statement, *“the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give **as the LORD your God blesses you**,”* is unquestionably what Paul had in mind when he told the Corinthians, *“let each one of you lay something aside, storing up **as he may prosper**.”*

It is therefore clear that Paul was having the Gentile assemblies participate in a broad way with the customs that the Jewish believers would appreciate, as a token of appreciation from the Gentiles who were made sharers of the covenants of Israel. After his travels to collect the donations, Paul made it a point to present the very large donation to the Jerusalem assembly on Pentecost. The Jewish believers would certainly be aware that the donations were not literally in conformity to the Law of Moses, since they were not placed into the Temple treasury as the Law required, but rather given for the poor Christian believers. However, it would be very hard for them to miss the parallel to the Law of Moses.

The Only Precedent in the Septuagint

Finally, there is one occurrence of the clause τῆς μιᾶς σαββάτων (the first [day] of Sabbaths) in the Greek Old Testament. It is found in the opening statement of Psalm 24³⁸ – “ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυὶδ τῆς μιᾶς σαββάτων.” It is no coincidence that this Psalm is exclusively about Jesus Christ, the only one worthy to ascend Mount Zion, the only one with clean hands and a pure heart, the “King of Glory” for whom the Temple gates will open of themselves to receive the Lord when He is made King.

³⁸ Psalm 23:1 in the LXX

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Psalm 24:1-10 LXX

1 A Psalm for David on the first day of the [Sabbaths].

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and all that dwell in it.

2 He has founded it upon the seas, and prepared it upon the rivers.

3 Who shall go up to the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place?

4 He that is innocent in his hands and pure in his heart; who has not lifted up his soul to vanity, nor sworn deceitfully to his neighbour.

5 He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and mercy from God his Saviour.

6 This is the generation of them that seek him, that seek the face of the God of Jacob.

Pause.

7 Lift up your gates, ye princes, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the king of glory shall come in.

8 Who is this king of Glory? the Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

9 Lift up your gates, ye princes; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the king of glory shall come in.

10 Who is this king of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is this king of glory.

Christ was proven to be the "King of Glory" on First-fruits, the day of His resurrection!³⁹ Paul referenced this Psalm when speaking of Jesus' crucifixion.

1 Corinthians 2:7-8

7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory,

*8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified **the Lord of glory.***

That Jesus was proven to be the King of Glory by His resurrection was stated by Paul in the introduction to the epistle to the Romans:

Romans 1:1-4

*1 Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God 2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, 4 and **declared to be the Son of God** with power according to the Spirit of holiness, **by the resurrection from the dead.***

Other Psalms were dedicated to other Sabbaths among the seven-Sabbath countdown to Pentecost. Psalm 48:1 has in its title, δευτέρῃ σαββάτου (for the second Sabbath). Psalm

³⁹ Rom. 1:1-4

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93:1 has in its title, τετράδι σαββάτων (for the fourth of the Sabbaths). We also previously mentioned Luke 6:1 which has ἐν σαββάτῳ δευτεροπρώτῳ (in the Sabbath, the second from the first). In all of these cases, the Sabbaths are those of the seven-Sabbath countdown to the Feast of Pentecost.⁴⁰ Consequently, all of the Biblical evidence agrees together regarding the meaning of this critical clause. And the two occurrences during Paul's ministry both have the countdown to Pentecost in view within the contexts.

The Disciples' Gathering Behind Locked Doors

Some point to the fact that Jesus' disciples met behind closed doors on the Sunday of His resurrection,⁴¹ and the following Sunday,⁴² and that these two instances established a new pattern to replace Sabbath observance. However, the reason they were gathered together was "*for fear of the Jews.*" They had heard the report of the women that He was alive. But they did not believe it.⁴³ They obviously could not have gathered for the purpose of celebrating a Sunday resurrection, since they were not yet convinced that He was alive!

John's account of Jesus' second appearance to them was "after eight days."⁴⁴ The Greek reads, μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτώ. Most assume that John used inclusive reckoning, counting the first day as the day of the resurrection. However, in Greek, when one wishes to refer to a full week later (the same day a week later) the expression is "μετὰ τὰς ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας"⁴⁵ (after seven days), not "after eight days." Even if John was using inclusive reckoning, that Sunday would be day 1, and the following Sunday would be day 8. Yet, he did not say "on the eighth day," but rather "after eight days." The normal sense would be after eight full days had elapsed. So if we count from that Sunday until μετὰ (AFTER) eight days, we arrive at Monday the following week. And if John was using exclusive reckoning, then it would have been Tuesday.

But even if we could justify two successive Sundays as being when Jesus appeared to the disciples, there is absolutely no hint that the disciples took this as some sort of precedent for them to follow, nor any hint that they were celebrating the resurrection of Jesus a week later. John simply informs us that Jesus showed up again after eight days, and encountered doubting Thomas, finally proving to him that He was alive. Notice

⁴⁰ Lev. 23:10-16

⁴¹ John 20:19

⁴² John 20:26

⁴³ Luke 24:11,36-43

⁴⁴ John 20:26

⁴⁵ See Gen. 7:10 LXX

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that the doors were again locked.⁴⁶ If the doors were locked the first time “for fear of the Jews” on the day of the resurrection, the same fear prompted them to lock the doors on this occasion. The natural implication is that the disciples had been continually behind locked doors the entire eight days due to their fear of being arrested (unless we are to suppose that they were only afraid of arrest on Sundays). There is absolutely no basis whatever to suppose that Jesus instructed His disciples on the day of His resurrection to stop observing the Sabbath day and to observe Sunday in honor of His resurrection.

Conclusion:

None of the passages which are traditionally used to justify Sunday worship for Christians actually substantiate that claim. In the Bible there is absolutely no evidence, justification, or basis for the claim that the earliest Christians met weekly on Sundays as a day of rest or worship. The only Sundays that were celebrated by the earliest Christians were annual, those two Sundays that coincided with “*Firstfruits*” (the anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection) and “*Pentecost*” (the anniversary of the arrival of the Breath of Truth to empower the apostolic mission). The translation of the critical clause as “*the first day of the week*” is not driven by sound principles of interpretation. It is driven by false presuppositions and ignoring the biblical Feast calendar. If Christians choose to worship on Sunday and ignore the Sabbath they do so based exclusively on extra-biblical tradition handed down by Rome. Ignoring the Sabbath necessarily forfeits the “blessing” that God placed on the Sabbath for all mankind.

⁴⁶ John 20:26