

# The First of the Sabbaths

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## Introduction

The expression **μία των σαββατων** (*mia tōn sabbatōn*), or a variation of this expression, is found in only seven places in the New Testament and in five of those places it describes the day on which the women, who went to anoint the dead body of Jesus, found the tomb empty and the dead body of Jesus nowhere to be seen.

Although this expression is generally translated to mean “*the first day of the week*”, that is, Sunday,<sup>1</sup> there are those who would suggest that there is much more meaning to this expression than merely its reference to Sunday. Some, who count Pentecost from the Sunday following the Saturday Sabbath during the days of Unleavened Bread, see in this expression the added meaning that it is the first of the seven Sabbaths to Pentecost that is also being described.

To see if there is any merit in this argument, we will review each of these and related expressions in the Greek to see what we can learn about this expression in its various contexts.

However, before we do this, let us consider the broad logic of such an assertion and what it is that it is really saying.

Now we know that the word *Sabbath* in both the Hebrew and the Greek can describe either the seventh day of the week or even the whole week of seven days. Therefore, we first need to decide if the expression “*the first of the Sabbaths*” is referring to the Sabbath day alone or to the first week of the seven weeks till Pentecost.

If we assume that it is referring to a particular Sabbath day then the expression is clearly nonsensical because there is no doubt that the

women came to the tomb early on Sunday morning and not on the Saturday Sabbath.

If, however, we take the word Sabbath to mean a week of seven days, and therefore the first of the seven weeks till Pentecost, then this would also create some problems since,

- What does it mean to say “*early in the first week*” or “*early in the first of the weeks*”?
- Which day of the week would this be describing and would it be sensible to be thinking of Pentecost when describing the day on which the women went to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus?

To say “*early in the week*” could mean any one of about three days (Sunday, Monday or Tuesday), just as saying “*late in the week*” could mean Thursday, Friday or Saturday. At the same time, it seems somewhat pointless and rather curious to be describing Sunday in such a general way, one that has more to do with the counting of weeks to Pentecost than with its relationship to the order of the days in the week.

So even from this very cursory consideration of the expression “*the first of the Sabbaths*” it seems that there is some difficulty with the idea that the expression **μία των σαββατων** is describing the first of the seven Sabbaths till Pentecost – whatever the word Sabbath here may mean. Nevertheless, let us now take a closer look at all seven instances in the New Testament where this expression is used to see what we can glean from the Greek text about the widest possible meaning of this expression.

## The Scriptures

**Please Note:** Words shown below in square brackets [...] are not part of the original Greek text but are implied by the grammar of the Greek text and so are shown here to give the correct sense of what the Greek text is really saying.

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<sup>1</sup> The MMT (Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah) document from among the Dead Sea Scrolls, specifically the document 4Q394 1-2, seems to be clear in its description of Sunday, the first day of the week, as being “*first of Sabbath*.” It is translated by Vermes to say: “On the twenty-first of it: sabbath. On the twenty-second of it: Feast of Oil, first of sabbath.” – Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London: Penguin Books, 2004, Revised Edition, p.223.

**Matthew 28:1**

Οψε Opse adverb	After / late
δε de conjunction	but
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	of sabbaths
τη tē article, dative, plural, neuter	in the
επιφωσκουση epiphōskousē dative, singular, feminine, participle, present, active	drawing near / dawning
εις eis preposition	into / towards
μιαν mian cardinal number, accusative, feminine	[day] one
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	of sabbaths
ηλθεν ēlthen verb, 3 singular, indicative, aorist, active	she came
Μαρια Maria name, nominative, singular, feminine	Mary

The first thing we should notice here is that the word οψε (*opse*) is followed by the genitive case of the word Sabbath and so takes the meaning of “*after*” rather than its usual meaning of “*late*”. This is typical of the change in meaning of some Greek words whose sense is governed by Greek grammar – for example, the use of προτος (*protos*) with a genitive to mean “*before*” rather than its usual meaning of “*first*” (see Jn 1:15, 30).

This, then, tells us that it was “*after the Sabbaths*” had ended and it was dawning “*into one of Sabbaths*” that the two Marys came to the tomb. In

other words, it was clearly very early on Sunday morning that the two Marys came to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus.

We should also note here another important fact of the Greek grammar, namely, that the word μια (*mia*) is in the *feminine* gender so as to agree with the noun to which it is relating or describing. However, the nearest noun σαββατων (*sabbatōn*) is in the neuter gender and so cannot be the noun to which μια relates. Now it is not unusual in New Testament Greek grammar to write a definite article or adjective without its corresponding noun. However, as Greek grammar requires that the gender of all related words must agree, what this effectively does is that it requires the reader to understand that there is a noun of corresponding gender missing from the written text but which needs to be understood within the text to obtain the correct sense and meaning of what is being said. It is very simple to deduce from the context of Matthew 28:1 that the feminine noun that is missing in this case is the word ἡμερα (*hēmera*, “day”).

We should further note that the word μια is a cardinal number and so needs to be understood to mean “*one*” and not “*first*”. The word “*first*” is an ordinal rather than a cardinal number and is described by the totally different and unrelated Greek word “*protos*.” Consequently, the Greek text here is telling us that it was not so much early on the “*first of the Sabbaths*” that the two Marys came to the tomb as it was “*on day one of weeks*”, that is, on the day that is “*day one*” of each and every week of the year. Such an exegesis is more strongly supported by the corresponding Greek texts of Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; and Acts 20:7, as we shall see.

We can see, therefore, that in the text of Matthew 28:1, the Greek grammar precludes the understanding that this was the first of the seven Sabbaths till Pentecost. Rather, it is telling us that it was on the first day of the week (Sunday) that the two Marys came to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> No other explanation is logically possible and the idea of added meaning in the expression μιαν σαββατων (*mian sabbatōn*) has to be rejected.

<sup>2</sup> “In the reckoning of days of the week [in Greek], cardinals are sometimes used instead of ordinals.” – John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of Numbers in the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968, p.41.

**Mark 16:2**

και kai conjunction	and
λιαν lian adverb	very
πρωϊ prōi adverb	early (in the morning)
της tēs article, genitive, singular, feminine	of the [day]
μιας mias cardinal number, genitive, feminine	one
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	of sabbaths
ερχονται erchontai verb, 3 plural, indicative, present, active	they come
επι epi preposition	to
το to article, accusative, singular, neuter	the
μνημειον mnēmeion noun, accusative, singular, neuter	tomb
ανατειλαντος anateilantos genitive, singular, masculine/neuter participle, aorist, active	after rising
του tou article, genitive, singular, masculine/neuter	of the
‘ηλιου hēliou noun, genitive, singular, masculine	sun

Here the definite article της (*tēs*) and the cardinal number μιας (*mias*) both relate to a feminine noun that is not given in the Greek text. As before, we can logically understand this “missing” noun to be the word ‘ημερα (*hēmera*, “day”) and so add it to the text to give it its correct sense. As a result, we can see that the whole text is centred on identifying the day of the week on which the women first found Jesus’ tomb empty rather than identifying the day on which the seven week count to Pentecost was to begin.

**Luke 24:1**

τη tē article, dative, singular, feminine	on the [day]
δε de conjunction	but
μια mia cardinal number, dative, feminine	one
των tōn article, genitive, plural, neuter	of the
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	sabbaths
ορθρου orthrou noun, genitive, singular, masculine	of early morning / dawn
βαθεος batheos adjective, genitive, singular, masculine	deep
ηλθον ēlthon verb, 3 plural, indicative, aorist, active	they came
επι epi preposition	to
το to article, accusative, singular, neuter	the

μνημα                      tomb  
mnēma  
noun, accusative, singular, neuter

Here we are told that the women came to the tomb at “*deep dawn*” indicating that it was so early in the morning that the dawn barely began to break the darkness of the night sky.

Here also we need to introduce the word ἡμερα (*hēmera*, “day”) in order to make grammatical sense of the Greek text so that the definite article τη (*tē*) and the cardinal number μια (“one”) are not left to “float” with no related noun. In the same way we also need to carry through from Luke 23:55 the noun γυναικες (*gunaiques*, “women”) into the context of this verse in order to make sense of the third person plural aorist verb ηλθον (*ēlthon*, “they came”).

And so, here again, we can see that the whole point of the scripture is to tell us when and on what day of the week the women came to the tomb with their spices, which they had prepared prior to the Sabbath, in order to anoint the dead body of Jesus. To extend this to suggest some relationship to Pentecost is an unwarranted extrapolation of what the Greek is saying and so should be rejected.

### John 20:1

Τη                              on the [day]  
tē  
article, dative, singular, feminine

δε                              but  
de  
conjunction

μια                              one  
mia  
cardinal number, dative, feminine

των                              of the  
tōn  
article, genitive, plural, neuter

σαββατων                      sabbaths  
sabbatōn  
noun, genitive, plural, neuter

Μαρια                              Mary  
Maria  
name, nominative, feminine

ἡ                              the  
hē  
article, nominative, singular, feminine

Μαγδαληνη                      Magdalene  
Magdalēnē  
name, nominative, feminine

ερχεται                              she comes  
erchetai  
verb, 3 singular, indicative, present, active

πρωι                              early (in the morning)  
prōi  
adverb

σκοτιας                              dark  
skotias  
noun, genitive, singular, feminine

ετι                              still  
eti  
adverb

ουσης                              being  
ousēs  
genitive, singular, feminine,  
participle, present, active

εις                              to  
eis  
preposition

το                              the  
to  
article, accusative, singular, neuter

μνημειον                              tomb  
mnēmeion  
noun, accusative, singular, neuter

All the same comments about the expression μια των σαββατων (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) can be made here as have been made in all of the scriptures reviewed so far. It is apparent that in all cases this expression is merely describing the day of the week on which the women found Jesus’ tomb empty and there is no suggestion whatsoever that there is any more meaning to this expression than its simple reference to Sunday, the first day of the week.

**John 20:19**

Ουσης ousēs genitive, singular, feminine, participle, present, active	being
ουν oun conjunction	therefore
οψιας opsias adjective, genitive, singular, feminine	evening
τη tē article, dative, singular, feminine	on the
‘ημερα hēmera noun, dative, singular, feminine	day
εκεινη ekeinē demonstrative pronoun, dative, singular, feminine	that
τη tē article, dative, singular, feminine	on the [day]
μια mia cardinal number, dative, feminine	one
των tōn article, genitive, plural, neuter	of the
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	sabbaths
και kai conjunction	and
των tōn article, genitive, plural, feminine	of the
θυρων thurōn noun, genitive, plural, feminine	doors

κεκλεισμενων kekleismenōn genitive, plural, feminine, participle, perfect, passive	having been shut
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If any of the earlier scriptures could be used in any way to suggest that μια των σαββατων (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) was also referring to the first of the seven weeks or Sabbaths till Pentecost then this portion of scripture refutes such a suggestion and clearly reinforces the fact that what is being defined here is the first day of the week, the Sunday evening when Jesus walked into the locked room where the disciples were gathered in fear of the Jewish religious authorities, and not the day from which to begin the fifty-day count to Pentecost. Here the expression μια των σαββατων (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) is being used to qualify what is meant by the expression the “*evening of that day*” without any suggestion as to its relationship to Pentecost.

**Acts 20:7**

Εν en preposition	in
δε de conjunction	but
τη tē article, dative, singular, feminine	in the [day]
μια mia cardinal number, dative, feminine	one
των tōn article, genitive, plural, neuter	of the
σαββατων sabbatōn noun, genitive, plural, neuter	sabbaths
συνηγμενων sunēgmenōn genitive, plural, masculine, participle, perfect, middle	having been assembled

των of the  
τῶν  
article, genitive, plural, masculine

μαθητῶν disciples  
mathētōn  
noun, genitive, plural, masculine

Here the Greek expression *μία τῶν σαββάτων* (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) is similar to that used by Mark and identical to that used by Luke and John. As a result, the exact same comments as were applicable to those scriptures also apply here. However, here we also need to look more closely at the context of the story because the context alone precludes us from understanding this to be the first of seven Sabbaths till Pentecost.

We are told in the scriptures that Paul was meeting with a number of his travelling colleagues in Troas having spent the days of Unleavened Bread in Philippi. We are also told that it took Paul five days to sail to Troas after having left Philippi some time after the end of the days of Unleavened Bread. In addition, we are told that Paul was in Troas for seven day before he met with his friends, for we are told (vv.7, 13) that he left Troas immediately following his late Sunday night and early Monday morning fellowship with his travelling companions. This means that at least 12 days, if not more, had elapsed since the days of Unleavened Bread had ended before Paul met his friends in Troas. As a result, this would put Paul some time into the third of the seven weeks of counting to Pentecost.

How then can the expression *μία τῶν σαββάτων* here logically refer to the first of the seven Sabbaths or the first of the fifty days till Pentecost? Clearly it cannot and does not and so any such assertion for the meaning of *μία τῶν σαββάτων* is totally unwarranted. The meaning here is very clearly, very simply and very unambiguously referring to Sunday as the first day of the week, without any other associated or implied meaning.

### 1 Corinthians 16:2

κατά every / according to  
kata  
preposition

μίας [day] one  
mian  
cardinal number, accusative, feminine

σαββάτων of sabbaths  
sabbatōn  
noun, genitive, plural, neuter

ἕκαστος each  
hekastos  
adjective, nominative, singular, masculine

ὑμῶν of you  
humōn  
personal pronoun, genitive, 2 plural

The use of *κατά* (*kata*) with the accusative *μίας* (*mian*) and the implied accusative *ἡμέραν* (“day”) gives this scripture the sense of “*every Sunday*”<sup>3</sup>. As a result, we have here the Greek text speaking about “*the first day of every week*”, as the RSV has it, rather than about any one particular Sunday in the year.

There is also no indication anywhere in the whole of the epistle to a specific time when Paul was planning to come to Corinth to despatch the offerings of the Corinthian church to the needy brethren in Jerusalem, other than the suggestion in 1 Corinthians 16:6 that it would be some time prior to the onset of winter.

From 1 Corinthians 16:8 we can guess that Paul wrote this epistle some time prior to Pentecost and yet was not planning to be in Corinth till around the time of Tabernacles – some six months later. Was the church in Jerusalem in so desperate a situation that they could wait for some six months for relief from the Corinthian brethren? Or was this to be help that was to follow the earlier assistance that Paul may have organised from the brethren in Galatia (1 Cor 16:1)? We do not know and it does not matter, except that in the whole context of the story it seems more likely that the setting aside of regular weekly offerings would result in a better overall outcome for the Jerusalem brethren than a single gift early in the agrarian cycle (the month of Aviv) when few if any new crops would yet be available to the Corinthians and those that were available would, more likely than not, be still “green”. Sending food at the very end of the harvest would provide the best of assistance for the Jerusalem brethren especially during the coming difficult winter months when food would probably

<sup>3</sup> See the following references:

Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973, Vol.3, p.288.

J.W. Wenham, *The Elements of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge: University Press, 1993, p.206.

be hard to come by, or would be very expensive, as a result of what were probably poor successive harvests in Israel.

Whatever may have been the actual details of the story, it seems obvious enough that there is little to commend the idea that Paul was instructing the Corinthian church to lay aside offerings for the brethren in Jerusalem on only the one Sunday during the days of Unleavened Bread or even only during the first of the seven weeks till Pentecost. Therefore, the use here of the expression *μια των σαββατων* (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) can refer logically only to Sunday as the first day of the week with no additional implication as to when to begin the seven-week count to Pentecost.

### Mark 16:9

Αναστας                      after rising  
anastas  
nominative, singular, masculine,  
participle, aorist, active

δε                              but / now  
de  
conjunction

πρωϊ                          early (in the morning)  
prōi  
adverb

πρωτη                      on first [day]  
prōtē  
ordinal number, dative, singular

σαββατου                  of a sabbath (week)  
sabbatou  
noun, genitive, singular, neuter

εφανε                      he appeared / became visible  
ephanē  
verb, 3 singular, indicative, aorist, passive

πρωτον                    first  
prōton  
adverb

Μαρια                      to Mary  
Maria  
name, dative, singular, feminine

This text does not use the expression *μια των σαββατων* (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) but it is, nevertheless, worthy of our attention if only

because it is normally translated into English in exactly the same way as is *μια των σαββατων*.

There are two things to be noticed about the expression *πρωτη σαββατου*, namely:

- The word *πρωτη* is an ordinal number and means “*first*” – unlike the word *μια* which is a cardinal number and so means “*one*”. As in the case of *μια*, *πρωτη* is also in its feminine form and so must relate to a feminine noun.
- The word *σαββατου* is in the singular, as against the plural *σαββατων*, and is also of neuter gender. As a result it cannot directly relate to *πρωτη* and so, just as before, we need to introduce the word *ημερα* (*hēmera*, “*day*”) into the text to make grammatical sense out of this expression.

As a result, the scripture in Mark 16:9 can be very correctly translated to say,

*Now having risen, early in the morning on the first day of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene ...*

As a result, there is no way in which this scripture can be misconstrued to suggest the first of seven Sabbaths till Pentecost, if only because the word “*Sabbath*” is here in the singular and not in the plural.

### Conclusion

It would seem that the argument about the added or implied meaning of *μια των σαββατων* (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) stems more from a need to support a particular position on how and when to start the count of fifty days to Pentecost than it does with the meaning of the expression itself, for we have seen from every one of the seven scriptures which use this expression that it simply means “*the first day of the week*” and refers generically to Sunday as the first day of the week. There is no way that this expression can logically or grammatically imply the counting of the “*seven Sabbaths*” till Pentecost and so any such suggestion must be discarded as being untrue.

That the counting of seven Sabbaths till Pentecost is not speaking of individual Sabbath days appears to be very self evident even without the fact that in most years, when the Sabbath does not fall on the last day of Unleavened Bread, there are in fact *eight* Sabbath days till Pentecost. This is brought

about by the fact that the last day of Unleavened Bread is also understood to be a Sabbath, all be it a so-called annual Sabbath which may fall on any day of the week, yet it is a Sabbath nevertheless.

This means, then, that to count seven Sabbaths to Pentecost is to count seven weeks, in which case the word Sabbath here has the meaning of “*week*” and not that of the seventh day of the week. This, by itself, discourages the understanding that *μία των σαββατων* (*mia tōn sabbatōn*) implies the counting of seven weeks till Pentecost, for reasons we have already discussed. As a result, we are left with only one reasonable conclusion to our study into the meaning of *μία των σαββατων*, namely, that this Greek expression refers only to Sunday as the first day of the week and does not have any other added or implied meaning about when or how we should start counting the fifty days till Pentecost.



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