

**'AFTER
THE SABBATH'
(MATT. 28.1a) –
INTO THE CRUX
YET AGAIN**

By

**Clinton A. Chisholm,
M.A., A.M.**

*Rev. Clinton Chisholm is the
associate pastor of the
Metropolitan Baptist Church,
Miami, Fl., and visiting
lecturer at the Caribbean
Graduate School of Theology
(CGST). He is a recent
graduate of Biola University
with an A.M. in apologetics.*

Reading Matt. 28.1 *a* as 'After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning . . . ' (NRSV; 'Ὁψὲ δὲ σαββάτων τῇ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ εἰς μίαν σαββάτων')¹ raises serious problems of interpretation or meaning. If one attempts to correlate the witness of the gospel writers on the timing of the visit(s)² of the women to the tomb of Jesus then the Matthean text, or its counterparts, may be misleading or just wrong.

What then should one make of the two temporal expressions? Are they inextricably linked and so the latter is more explanatory of the former concerning the timing of the women's visit or are they speaking to different events? Which period of time are the two expressions pointing to, evening on Saturday or early morning on Sunday? Is Matthew contradictory or clear in his use of these two temporal expressions?

The burden of the paper is to answer these questions.

The standard approach is to see the temporal expressions as linked

¹ I shall show later that another reading is possible and is probably the correct way of reading the Greek text.

² See the idea of 'visits' in Robertson (1930, 240).

in explaining when the women visited the tomb of Jesus. By this approach, Matthew is either contradictory, because ὥψε δὲ σαββάτων ('at the end of the Sabbath' or 'after the Sabbath'), suggests a different time period from τῇ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ εἰς μίαν σαββάτων ('as the first day of the week was beginning'), or he is clear because, read properly, both temporal expressions speak of the same time period for the visit of the women. We now explore the arguments for each position.

Matthew is contradictory

The basic problem noted by scholars, as summarised by Daniel Boyarin (2001, 678-688), has to do with the definite evening nuance of the first temporal expression -- ὥψε δὲ σαββάτων, 'at the end of the Sabbath'³ (Boyarin 2001, 678; Moulton and Milligan 1930, 470; Robertson 1930, 240) or 'after the Sabbath'⁴ (Thayer 1977, 471; Hagner 1995, 868) -- and the evening or possibly morning implication of the second -- τῇ ἐπιφωσκούσῃ εἰς μίαν σαββάτων, 'as the first day of the week was beginning [i.e. nightfall]' (Boyarin 2001, 678; Robertson 1930, 240) or 'as the first day of the week was dawning [i.e. morning]⁵'.

J. Michael Winger (1994, 285) says bluntly,

...the dual temporal clauses of Matt. 28.1, though they certainly introduce a single action, seem to set it at two different times... [t]he difficulty is that in their primary meanings, Matthew's two temporal clauses have inconsistent senses: ὥψε... means 'late', and ἐπιφώσκω means 'to grow light', so that v.1 reads: 'Late on the Sabbath, as it was becoming light on the first day of the week...' But,

³ The Greek construction is taken as a partitive genitive, so the time period being described is still a part of what the genitival term is, hence 'at the end of the Sabbath' is still within the period called Sabbath.

⁴ BAG (606) has this as a third meaning for ὥψε: "used as an improper prep. W. gen.", and likewise Porter (1992, 180), who notes that this is disputed.

⁵ The nuance reflected in English translations like the KJV, RSV, TEV, NIV, JB, NEB, NASB.

assuming that the Jewish day is here in view, this is impossible: the Jewish day begins at sunset.

Winger, though arguing that 'late' is the primary meaning of ὀψέ mentions that one could "take resort to a secondary meaning... 'after'; but this is attested only rarely, and not at all in the NT, early Christian or Jewish literature" (Winger 1994, 285).

Which should it really be, 'late on the Sabbath' or 'after the Sabbath'? The lexicons differ. Moulton and Milligan (1930, 470) tend toward 'late', because of the genitival construction in Matt. 28.1, but then proceed to mention that Blass-Debrunner argue for 'after' also owing to the use of the genitive in late Greek. This double option for ὀψέ plus the genitive is also mentioned by Abbot-Smith (1937, 332), but he leans toward 'after' as the "sense which seems to be required in Matt. 28¹."

For Thayer, the meaning is 'after the Sabbath' but he argues that way because of the proximity of the second temporal expression, without which, apparently, he would have opted for 'late on the Sabbath'. He says, "ὀψέ foll. by a gen. seems always to be partitive, denoting *late* in the period specified by the gen. (and consequently still belonging to it)..." (Thayer 1977, 471).⁶ Louw and Nida (1989, 67.50, 636), opt for 'after'.

On balance, it seems to the present writer that the first temporal expression should be translated as 'late on the Sabbath'. The translation 'after the Sabbath' has support only because of a certain kind of reading of the second expression or because of this nuance of 'after' in writers like Aelian and Philostratus, both born c. AD 170 and thus too late to be used as supportive evidence for Matthew's meaning.

⁶ Heinrich A.W. Meyer (1979, 518-19) avers, "...ὀψέ... with a defining genitive (without which it occurs nowhere else in the New Testament) always denotes the lateness of *the period thus specified and still current...*" He however goes on to argue for a "civil mode of reckoning, according to which the ordinary day was understood to extend from sunrise till sunrise again".

The appeal to a Semitic background (Moore 1905, 324,328; Grintz 1960, 37-39) for the meaning of ὀψὲ δὲ σαββάτων may seem ingenious but is, in fact, quite unnecessary and possibly dubious in value since the Greek is not really unclear. The hermeneutical key is to reckon with the partitive force of ὀψὲ δὲ σαββάτων.⁷

Even if it is agreed that the first temporal expression is really 'late on the Sabbath' the meaning given to the next temporal expression raises the charge of contradiction in Matthew. What time frame does τῇ ἐπιφώσκει εἰς μίαν σαββάτων really connote or, more particularly, what is the essential time nuance of ἐπιφώσκω?

If stripped to a single notion then ἐπιφώσκω means 'to grow light or to dawn [= morning]'. Hagner (1995, 868) and Driver (1965, 327) take this view. Driver (1965, 327) says the second temporal phrase "can mean only 'about daybreak on the first day of the week'." On this reading, there would be an obvious contradiction between a *supposed* single event happening 'late on the Sabbath', that is before sunset and 'about daybreak on the first day of the week'.

There are other approaches that show Matthew's consistency. To these we now turn.

Matthew is consistent

Contra Driver and Hagner, ἐπιφώσκω can also mean, legitimately, 'to approach or draw near' as seen in Luke 23.54 and the Gospel of Peter 9.35, and these passages, as Winger (1994, 285) noted, are accounts of events following the death of Jesus. Luke

⁷ Note the unnecessary confusion caused by the Semitic background approach in Winger's comment on Moore 1905, 286, where he says, "...since אָפּוּקִי (מֶרְצֵא) here means 'evening', it is rendered by ὀψέ, which in absolute usage often means 'evening' – as a special case of its literal meaning 'late'; then חֲבֹשׁ is transliterated into its Greek equivalent, apparently without realizing that this gives the phrase a new meaning: 'late on the sabbath', not after sunset but before it." (my emphasis). Invoke the partitive genitive force of ὀψὲ δὲ σαββάτων and Winger's comment is vitiated.

23.54 reads, καὶ ἡμέρα ἦν παρασκευῆς καὶ σάββατον ἐπέφωσκεν, “and it was the day of Preparation and the Sabbath was drawing near”. “Since Jesus died at the ninth hour (23.44), a reference to the dawn seems to be excluded...” (Winger 1994, 285).⁸ The Gospel of Peter (9.35) reads “in the night in which the Lord’s Day drew near”.⁹

John Nolland (1993, 1165) says of Luke’s use of ἐπιφώσκω, “[t]hough Luke clearly intends to point to the near arrival of sundown, when Sabbath would begin, his particular use of ἐπιθώσκειν [sic] has not been paralleled. He could have erred because of a wish to adopt an ‘elegant’ word from his second source (if there was one), or the usage could represent a Greek-speaking Jewish adoption, for use in relation to a Jewish reckoning of the day...”

It is not clear what Nolland means when he says Luke’s use of ἐπιφώσκειν ‘has not been paralleled’ because the use of ἐπιφώσκω in the Gospel of Peter in the sense of ‘to approach or draw near’ matches Luke’s use and Matthew’s. Additionally, a convincing case has been established by Moore (1905, 315-33) and Boyarin (2001, 681-82) that the Hebrew and Jewish-Aramaic equivalent of ἐπιφώσκω in Matthew 28.1 would be ערב and ארבע עשר, respectively, and both words mean ‘evening’.

On this reading of ἐπιφώσκω, *if* the two temporal expressions are linked to the single event of the women’s visit, then Matthew is saying “in the last part of the Sabbath as the first day of the week was approaching or drawing near, Mary Magdalene and the other

⁸ Robertson, op. cit., 240, says, “Both Matthew here [28.1] and Luke (23.54) use dawn (ἐπιφώσκω) for the dawning of the twenty-four hour day at sunset, not of the dawning of the twelve-hour day at sunrise.”

⁹ See also Gospel of Peter 2.35 for a similar use of ἐπιφώσκω. The debate concerning the priority/dependence relationship between Matthew and the Gospel of Peter would not negate the use being made of the Gospel of Peter here. For a helpful article on the debate see Kirk (1994, 572-595).

Mary went to see the tomb.” This reading is defensible and quite internally consistent.

A problem for this reading would be to reconcile it with the general Sunday morning references in the other gospels (Luke 24.1; John 20.1), especially Mark 16.1-2, which Winger (1994, 287) rightly observes, has structural similarities and where the [a?] visit of the women is described as happening *λίαν πρωτ̄ τῆ μιᾶ τῶν σαββάτων...ἀνατείλαντος τοῦ ἡλίου* (Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise; NIV), unmistakably at sunrise on Sunday. Boyarin’s comment on this problem is that “...Mark 16:2 [is] a misunderstanding of a Semitic idiom that Matthew understood well (or at least translated literally)” (Boyarin 2001, 688).

This problem only arises if the two temporal expressions in Matthew speak, *necessarily, about one event*, the visit of the women.

We turn now to another option — surprisingly, not even hinted at by any of the sources used so far — that shows the consistency of Matthew and which is consonant with the other gospels.

Ralph Woodrow offers this other option and he says of the apparent problem of reconciling Matthew’s two temporal expressions:

There is a very simple solution, so simple we wonder why it has often been overlooked! We believe the words, ‘in the end of the Sabbath,’ were not describing when the women went to the tomb, but when the tomb was sealed and guarded. Without changing the wording in the least, the entire passage can be brought into harmony with every other verse, by simply placing the period in a different place. To do this is certainly not out of order, for punctuation was not a part of the original. (Woodrow 1993, 21-22).

Woodrow’s proposed reading of Matt. 27.66 to 28.1, would then be, “So they went, and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch in the end of the Sabbath. As it began to dawn toward the first day of the week came Mary Magdalene...” (Woodrow 1993, 23).

What should one make of this unorthodox option? Relocating the punctuation mark from 'watch' to 'Sabbath' has nothing against it in terms of the resulting syntax unless one feels the need for a connective particle with the longer reading of 27.66 and the beginning of 28.1. One might wonder though, why Matthew was, seemingly, so indirect in saying that the chief priests and the Pharisees made their request to secure the tomb on the Sabbath day in 27.62 then clearly mentioning that the tomb was sealed 'late on the Sabbath day' in verse 66.

Woodrow's option certainly allows for the greatest degree of agreement among the gospel writers concerning the visit of the women to the tomb of Jesus and eliminates all problems and contradictions, real and apparent, between Matthew's temporal expressions. One can now appreciate the unanimity in the gospels and the early Christian writers that the resurrection of Jesus was early on a Sunday morning.

This option also vitiates any charge one might be minded to level at Matthew for inconsistency between his temporal expressions (Winger 1994, 285), for lack of competence in translating properly from a Semitic original to Greek (Winger 1994, 286-87), and for poor editorial work in borrowing from Mark (Gardiner-Smith 1926, 179-81). Indeed, Woodrow's translational option reduces the need to rely on a Semitic original behind Matt. 28.1 to make good sense of the text, even if the ancient reader knows only Greek.

Additionally, Woodrow's option wields an edge of greater explanatory power than the Semitic approach which forces Matthew into contradiction of all of the other evangelists on several issues. If it was late on the Sabbath that the women really visited, according to the Semitic approach, then a number of other events would be happening late on the Sabbath and thus in blatant contradiction of the 'Sunday morning' timing for these in the other gospels.

Chisholm: After the Sabbath

Woodrow, though not dealing with the Semitic approach, raises questions about the implications of taking 'late on the Sabbath' as having to do with the women's visit. Woodrow (1993, 20) queries,

If it was late on the sabbath when the women went to the tomb and found it empty, why do all the other Gospel writers place their visit to the tomb early in the morning on "the first day of the week"?

If it was late on the Sabbath when the women discovered the stone was rolled away, why would they be asking the next morning: "Who will roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulcher?" (Mark 16:2,3).

If it was late on the Sabbath that the women found the tomb empty, why would they be taking spices to anoint the dead body the next morning, knowing it was not there? (Luke 24:1).

Into the crux, yet again, can lead to new possibilities from a little known source.



REFERENCE LIST

- Abbot-Smith, G. 1937. *Manual Greek lexicon of the New Testament*. London: T. & T. Clark.
- Bauer, Walter et al. 1957. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 2001. 'After the Sabbath' (Matt. 28.1) — Once more into the crux. *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 52, pt. 2 (October): 678-688.
- Driver, G.R. 1965. Two problems in the New Testament. *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 16, pt. 2 (October): 327-331.
- Gardiner-Smith, P. 1926. ΕΠΙΦΩΣΚΕΙΝ. *Journal of Theological Studies* 27: 179-181.
- Grintz, J.M. 1960. Hebrew as the spoken and written language in the last days of the second temple. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79:37-39. Quoted in Winger 1994, 286.
- Hagner, Donald. 1995. *Word biblical commentary*. Vol. 33b, *Matthew 14-28*. Dallas: Word Books.
- Kirk, Alan. 1994. Examining priorities: Another look at the *Gospel of Peter's* relationship to the New Testament Gospels. *New Testament Studies* 40: 572-595.
- Louw, Johannes and Eugene A. Nida. 1989. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*. 2^d ed. New York: United Bible Societies.
- Meyer, Heinrich A.W. 1979. *Critical and exegetical hand-book to the Gospel of Matthew*. Winona Lake: Alpha Publications.

- Moore, G.F. 1905. Conjectanea talmudica. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 26: 315-333.
- Moulton, James and George Milligan. 1930. *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Nolland, John. 1993. *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 35c, *Luke 18.35-24.53*. Dallas: Word Books.
- Porter, Stanley. 1992. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Robertson, Archibald. 1930. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. Vol. 1. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.
- Thayer, Joseph. 1977. *Greek-English Lexicon*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Winger, J. Michael. 1994. When Did the Women Visit the Tomb?: Sources for Some Temporal Clauses in the Synoptic Gospels. *New Testament Studies* 40: 284-288.
- Woodrow, Ralph. 1993. "Three days & three nights"—reconsidered in light of Scripture. Palm Springs: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association.