

Messianic Sabbath Helper

Acts 1:12

“A Sabbath Day’s Journey”

“Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.”

The statement, “Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (which is near Jerusalem, a *Shabbat* day’s journey)” (TLV), appears within the narrative of how following Yeshua’s ascension into Heaven, the party which witnessed it, returns to the city of Jerusalem. A Sabbath day’s journey is a length of distance derived from various Tanach passages (Exodus 16:29; Numbers 35:5; Joshua 3:4), specifying the permitted length that one could walk on *Shabbat*. The distance of 2,000 cubits for a Sabbath day’s journey is codified in the Mishnah:

“On that day did R. Aqiba expound as follows: ‘And you shall measure without the city for the east side two thousand cubits... (Num. 35:5). And another Scripture says *From the wall of the city and outward a thousand cubits round about* (Num. 35:4). It is not possible to state that the required measure is a thousand *amahs*, for two thousand *amahs* already have been specified. But it is not possible to state that the required measure is two thousand *amahs*, for one thousand *amahs* already have been specified. So how shall we rule? A thousand *amahs* form the outskirts, while two thousand *amahs* form the Sabbath limit.’ R. Eliezer the son of R. Yose the Galilean says, ‘A thousand *amahs* form the outskirts, and two thousand *amahs* cover the surrounding fields and vineyards’” (m.*Sotah* 5:3).¹

The distance of 2,000 cubits is often estimated as being around the modern lengths of 0.6 miles or 1.2 kilometers. The Amplified Bible has, “a Sabbath day’s journey (three-quarters of a mile),” with the Goodspeed New Testament having, “half a mile away.” The Qumran community actually opted for the shorter distance of 1,000 cubits (CD 10.21)² in their stricter Sabbath *halachah*.

What does the reference to a Sabbath day’s journey in Acts 1:12 signify? Commentators are not agreed. A general approach is witnessed by Ben Witherington III,

“The reference to a sabbath day’s journey (about 3/4 of a mile) in v. 12 is intriguing and at the very least suggests that our author was familiar with Jewish ways of putting things, or even had been a God-fearer or proselyte and became used to speaking in Jewish ways.”³

The CJB has rendered Acts 1:12 as, “Then they returned the *Shabbat*-walk distance from the Mount of Olives to Yerushalayim.” Other than noting what the actual distance would have likely been, David H. Stern does not comment that much further on the possible connection between a Sabbath day’s journey and the Disciples’ observance of the Sabbath:

“The Mount of Olives is east of what is today called the Old City, which corresponds (very approximately) to what was meant anciently by Yerushalayim. The rabbinic rules

¹ Neusner, *Mishnah*, 455.

² “One may not travel outside his city more than a thousand cubits” (CD 10.21; Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 68).

³ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113.

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for *Shabbat*, with certain exceptions, limit walking outside a walled city to 2,000 cubits (about 0.57 mile). According to Lk. 24:50-51 Yeshua left his *talmidim* [disciples] and ascended into heaven from Beit-Anyah [Bethany], which is on the mount's south slope. The olive grove in the garden of Gat-Sh'manim [Gethsemane], based on Zechariah 14:3-5, says that the Messiah will appear on the Mount of Olives; vv. 9-12 tie Yeshua's first coming and his departure with his reappearance in a manner that will fulfill that expectation."⁴

While there are surely those who think that the Acts 1:12 reference to a Sabbath day's journey is an indication that Yeshua's ascension occurred on the Sabbath,⁵ others instead conclude that the reference to a Sabbath day's journey is one of distance only. I. Howard Marshall is reflective of this view:

"A *sabbath day's journey* was about 1.2 km (3/4 mile); the expression is a Jewish one, and is not meant to imply that the event took place on a sabbath. The point is rather that the ascension (like the resurrection appearances of Jesus in Lk. 24) took place near the vicinity of Jerusalem."⁶

In other units of measurement, the historian Josephus recorded that the distance between the Mount of Olives and the city of Jerusalem was between five and six stadia (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.169; *Wars of the Jews* 5.70).⁷

Some have taken the Acts 1:12 reference to a Sabbath day's journey, as opposed to more neutral distance reckoning, as an indication of how the vicinity of Jerusalem was a religious place. F. Scott Spencer concludes, "The clock is set to 'Jewish standard time', subjecting the travellers to the limits and opportunities of various fixed hours of prayer, days of consecration (such as the weekly sabbath) and seasons of pilgrimage and festivity."⁸

What today's Messianic readers of Acts 1:12 are probably most interested about, is what it indicates regarding the First Century Believers' observance of the Sabbath. The thought of Eckhard J. Schnabel has to be noted, "This passage does not allow any inferences concerning the views of the early church regarding sabbath observance."⁹ Many have taken Acts 1:12 as an interesting factoid, and then moved on. Others could take the Acts 1:12 reference to a Sabbath day's journey, and extrapolate that the First Century Believers—certainly in Judea—were in strict adherence to *all* of the strict traditions associated with *Shabbat*.

What we can probably deduce for certain, regarding Acts 1:12 and a Sabbath day's journey, is that walking a distance of 2,000 cubits or so, was observed by many of the early Messianic Jewish Believers, and that the author of Acts (who most conservatives conclude is Luke the doctor), was well acquainted with mainline Jewish traditions and

⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 217.

⁵ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 52.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 62; also Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 76.

⁷ Cf. Bock, 76.

⁸ F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 39.

⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 82.

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customs from the Second Temple period. It would be too much to conclude that all Messianic Jewish Believers from the First Century only walked 2,000 cubits, and no more, on the Sabbath. It is fair to conclude that walking 2,000 cubits was considered normative and not irregular, along with a series of other *Shabbat* observances.