

“The First Day of the Week”

by Eric Lyons, M.Min.

All four gospel accounts reveal how Jesus rose (and His tomb was found empty) “on the first day of the week” (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2,9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1; cf. 20:19). Years later, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church commanding them to make regular contributions “on the first day of the week” (1 Corinthians 16:2; or “on the first day of **every** week”—NASB, NIV, RSV). Luke recorded in the book of Acts how Paul, while on his third missionary journey, assembled with the Christians in Troas “on the first day of the week” (20:7). The phrase “the first day of the week” appears eight times in the most widely used English translations of the New Testament. Based on this reading of the text, along with various supplemental passages (e.g., Revelation 1:10), Christians assemble to worship God on Sunday. Upon looking at the Greek text, however, some have questioned the integrity of the translation “the first day of the week,” wondering if a better wording would be “the Sabbath day.”

Admittedly, a form of the Greek word for sabbath (*sabbaton* or *sabbatou*) does appear in each of the eight passages translated “first day of the week.” For example, in Acts 20:7 this phrase is translated from the Greek *mia ton sabbaton*. However, *sabbaton* (or *sabbatou*) is never translated as “the Sabbath day” in these passages. Why? Because the word is used in these contexts (as Greek scholars overwhelmingly agree) to denote a “week” (Perschbacher, 1990, p. 364), “a period of seven days” (Danker, et al., 2000, p. 910; cf. Thayer, 1962, p. 566). Jesus once used the term “Sabbath” in this sense while teaching about the sinfulness of self-righteousness (Luke 18:9). He told a parable of the sanctimonious Pharisee who prayed: “God, I thank You that I am not like other men— extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast **twice a week**; I give tithes of all that I possess” (18:11-12, emp. added). The phrase “twice a week” comes from the Greek *dis tou sabbatou*. Obviously Jesus was **not** saying that the Pharisee boasted of fasting twice on the Sabbath day, but twice (*dis*) **a week** (*tou sabbatou*).

According to R.C.H. Lenski, since “[t]he Jews had no names for the weekdays,” they “designated them with reference to their Sabbath” (1943, p. 1148). Thus, *mia ton sabbaton* means “the first (day) with reference to the Sabbath,” i.e., the first (day) following the Sabbath (Lenski, p. 1148), or, as we would say in 21st century English, “the first day of the week.”

After spending years examining Jewish writings in the Babylonian Talmud, Hebraist John Lightfoot wrote *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, in which he expounded upon the Hebrew method of counting the days of the week. He noted: “The Jews reckon the days of the week thus; *One day (or the first day) of the sabbath: two (or the second day) of the sabbath,*” etc. (1859, 2:375, emp. in orig.). Lightfoot then quoted from two different Talmud tractates. *Maccoth* alludes to those who testify on “*the first of the sabbath*” about an individual who stole an ox. Judgment was then passed the following day—“*on the second day of the sabbath*” (Lightfoot, 2:375, emp. in orig.; *Maccoth*, Chapter 1). *Bava Kama* describes ten enactments ordained by a man named Ezra, including the public reading of the law “on the second and fifth days of the sabbath,” and the washing of clothes “on the fifth day of the sabbath” (Lightfoot, 2:375; *Bava Kama*, Chapter 7). In Michael Rodkinson’s 1918 translation of *Maccoth* and *Bava Kama*, he accurately translated “the second day of the sabbath” as Monday, “the fifth day of the sabbath” as Thursday, and “**the first of the sabbath**” as **Sunday**.

If the word *sabbaton* in passages such as Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, and Acts 20:7 actually denoted “the Sabbath day,” rather than “a period of seven days,” one would expect some of the foremost Bible translations to translate it thusly. Every major English translation of the Bible, however, translates *mia ton sabbaton* as “the first day of the week.” Why? Because scholars are aware of the Jewish method of counting the days of the week by using the Sabbath as a reference point.

Finally, consider the difficulty that would arise with Jesus’ resurrection story if *sabbaton* was translated Sabbath. “Now when the Sabbath **was past**, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first **Sabbath** (*sabbaton*), they came to the tomb when the sun had risen” (emp. added). Such a rendering of *sabbaton* in Mark 16:2 would be nonsensical. The Sabbath was over, and the *mia ton sabbaton* (“first day of the week”) had begun. The passage is understood properly only when one recognizes the Jewish method of reckoning weekdays.

Just as second century apologists Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 150) spoke of Jesus as rising from the dead “on the first day after the Sabbath” (Dialogue..., 41), and equated this day with “Sunday” (“First Apology,” 67), so should 21st century Christians. That Jesus rose from the dead “on the first day of the week” (Mark 16:9), and that Christians gathered to worship on this day (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; cf. Justin Martyr, “First Apology,” 67), is an established fact. Sunday is the first day after the Jewish Sabbath—the “first day of the week.”

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