

Sunday in the Greek

Is the First Day of the Week Called the Sabbath in the Greek?

An Examination of the Greek of Matt. 28:1 and Parallel Passages.

By Uriah Smith

TO Believers in Sunday sacredness the inquiry whether or not the first day of the week is ever called the Sabbath in the New Testament, is one of importance. If that day is called the Sabbath by any inspired New Testament writer, it would be good evidence to show that it is a divine institution, and that its observance as such rests upon moral obligation. If it is not thus called the Sabbath, then whatever other arguments may be adduced to show that it is a divinely-appointed weekly rest day, it must be conceded, no matter how reluctantly, that the New Testament does not recognize it as such.

And what is to hinder a definite and decisive answer to this question? There is the record. Appeal has only to be made to that: If the statement is there, it surely can be found; if it is not there, that fact can be made equally apparent.

So far as the English Scriptures are concerned, to whatever version appeal is made, the reader can easily satisfy himself, if he is willing to indulge in the innocent

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diversion of looking for it, *and not finding it*; for there is nothing of the kind in any English version. But the New Testament was not originally written in English, but in Greek. Hence appeal is made to the Greek, in the forlorn hope that it may be found that there is some statement there that the first day is the Sabbath, which has by some means eluded the eye of every translator, and hence does not appear in the English as it ought to do.

What, then, is found in the Greek? -It is found that the Greek word for Sabbath is *sabbaton*; and that in those passages in the New Testament where we have the expression "first day of the week," the word "week" is from this same word, *sabbaton*. Whereupon the superficial observer is led to exclaim: "O joy! Here we have it! The first day of the week is, in the Greek, Sabbath!"

Not quite so fast, friend. It should be remembered that men of profound learning, as well versed in the Greek tongue as it is possible for men to be at the present time, have expended deep study and patient labor on the translation of the New Testament from the original Greek into English. Did they find that Greek word *sabbaton* in these passages? Did they know how to translate it? They have seen fit to render it by the term "week," in the passages referred to. The learned

men who gave us the common or King James' version, so rendered it; and the presumably still more learned men from whom we have the Revised Version, have followed the same course; and a little modesty would therefore be very becoming to any one who is disposed to dispute their claim.

It is a fact which should be known, and always remembered, that the word *sabbaton* has another meaning besides that of "Sabbath," referring to a single day. In certain cases it means the entire period of the seven days which constitute the week, and is then translated "week." This meaning is acquired from the simple fact that the week owes its origin, and its continued

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existence, to the Sabbath alone. Nothing in nature gives us the weekly division of time. Days, months, seasons, years, and cycles are marked by the movements of the earth and the three members of our solar system. But no astronomical movements give us the definite and regularly recurring period of just seven days, which constitutes the week of the present day, and of all historic time. That, as already stated, derives its existence from the Sabbath alone. Therefore, as the Sabbath marked and measured this period of time, it was very natural to call this the "sabbatical period," and apply to it in Hebrew the name *shabbath*, and in Greek the name *sabbaton*, and then to name the days of this period in their order, as the first day, second day, third day, etc., of the "Sabbath," or sabbatical period, or *week*. This very thing the Hebrews did; and this is why the word "sabbath" came sometimes to mean "the week."

If it is necessary to refer to authorities in support of this plain fact, the reader may consult the lexicographers, Greenfield, Pickering, Bagster, Liddell and Scott, and Robinson, in the Greek, who all give the word "week" as one of the definitions of *sabbaton*; and Gesenius, to the same effect in the Hebrew, that is, that "week" is one of the definitions of the word *shabbath* in that language, when occurring in such connections.

Robinson (Lexicon, under *sabbaton*) says: "In the Talmudists the days of the week are written . . . 'the first, second, third day in the sabbath' (week); see Lightfoot, Hor. Heb. in Matt. 28:1. Comp. 'Ideler Handb. der Chronol.', I, p. 481."

Lightfoot, on Matt. 28:1, gives to the words *eis mian sabbaton* the translation, "towards the first day of the week," and in a following comment says:-

"The Jews reckon the days of the week thus: One day (or the first day) of the Sabbath. Two (or second day) of the Sabbath. . . . Ezra ordained that they should read the law publicly, on the second and fifth days of the Sabbath, etc.," meaning, of course, the

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second and fifth days of the week. "The sixth day they commonly call *the eve of the Sabbath*."

The "Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge," article "Week," says:-

"The enumeration of the days of the week commenced at Sunday. Saturday was the last, or seventh, and was the Hebrew Sabbath, or day of rest. The Egyptians gave to the days of the week the names that they assigned to the planets. From the circumstance that the Sabbath was the principal day of the week, the whole period of seven days was likewise called *shabat*; in Syriac,

shabta; in the N.T., *sabbaton* and *sabbata*. The Jews, accordingly, in designating the successive days of the week, were accustomed to say, the first day of the Sabbath (that is, of the week), the second day of the Sabbath; that is, Sunday, Monday, etc. Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19."

Not to multiply quotations unnecessarily on this point, the reader is referred to Cruden, in his concordance; Bloomfield, in Greek N.T.; Nevins, in "Biblical Antiquities," p. 174; "Union Bible Dictionary," art. "Week;" Calmet; and Young, in his new concordance; all of who bear testimony to the same effect.

There is, to be sure, another word in the Greek, *hebdomas*, which means "week;" but this word is not used in the New Testament. The word "week," in the New Testament, is always from *sabbaton*.

We are now prepared to look at those passages in which the phrase "first day of the week" occurs in the New Testament. There are just eight of them, as follows: Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2, 9; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2. In each instance there is a numeral adjective used (expressed in English by the word "first"); "day" is not in the Greek, but is supplied (as denoted in English by being printed in Italics); and the word *sabbaton*, meaning "week," is in the genitive case (a case in the Greek which denotes a relation expressed in English by the word "of"). So we have the reading, "first [day understood] of the week."

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Thus, in every instance in the New Testament, the phrase "first day of the week" is strictly literal and strictly accurate, according to the Greek.

A few words, now, devoted to analyzing the sentence will show the philosophy of the construction, make it clear that no other rendering than "first day of the week," as given in the Bible, is possible, and show that any attempt to make these passages call Sunday the Sabbath, springs from ignorance or dishonesty, presumably the former, as any intelligent man should be ashamed to be dishonest.

For the benefit of English readers, a word or two in reference to the Greek may be pardoned at this point. Of nouns, the gender, number, and relationship must be shown. These points are determined by the cases, of which there are five, - nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and vocative. And all these particulars are indicated by a change in the form, or in the termination, of the words. The subject of a finite verb is, of course, put in the nominative case. If the relationship is such as would be denoted in English by the word "of," the noun would change its form to the genitive case. Thus, what we would call in English "the man's book," would be in Greek, literally, "the book *of* the man," the word "man" being put in the genitive case. Adjectives must agree with their nouns in gender, number, and case; and these particulars are indicated in adjectives, the same as in nouns, by a change in the form or termination of the word. The word *sabbaton* is used in the New Testament both in the singular and the plural, the plural signifying generally the same as the singular. It has a plural signification only in Acts 17:2, where it refers to a number of Sabbaths, and in Col. 2:16, where it refers to the seven yearly or ceremonial sabbaths of the Jewish system. The word *sabbaton* is of the neuter gender.

Having noted well these facts, let us mark their application in the expression "first day of the week," as found in the eight passages in the New Testament already referred to. The construction of each of these passages is exactly the same; and hence the explanation

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of one will be the explanation of them all. As the first instance is that of Matt. 28:1, we will take that as the sample. To make the matter as simple as may be, we give herewith the Greek, with a literal word-for-word translation, and a translation of the Greek into English characters, of the first two clauses of that verse, as follows:

"Opse de sabbaton, ¹¹ te epiphoskouse eis mian sabbaton."

"Late but of the Sabbath, it beginning to dawn into the first of the week."

The reader will see at once that a correct and euphonious rendering of this passage is given in the common version: "In the end of the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week." But the query may arise why *sabbaton*, in the first instance, should be rendered "Sabbath," referring to the seventh day, and the same word, in the same form, in the second instance, should be rendered "week," referring to all the seven days. The reason is that the word in the last instance is preceded by the numeral adjective *mian*; and the lexicons tell us that *always* when the word *sabbaton* follows such adjectives, it means "week," the adjective specifying the day of the week, as the first, second, etc. Thus it is easily and absolutely determined when to render the word *sabbaton* "Sabbath," and when "week." Whenever it is preceded by a numeral adjective, as it is in all the eight texts above referred to, it means "week."

But why should the word "day" be supplied, making the passage read "first day of the week"? It is because the numeral adjective, *mian*, is there, and it must agree with some noun either expressed or understood. But there is no such noun expressed; therefore we must search to see what noun can be understood. Let us then examine this numeral adjective, *mian*. It is from the first of the *cardinal* numbers, *heis* meaning "one," but here, by a Hebraism used for the ordinal, "first".

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We here present the word in its different genders, and follow its declension till we find the form before us. Adjectives are declined like nouns:-

	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
	gender	gender	gender
Nominative case:	<i>heis,</i>	<i>mia,</i>	<i>hen.</i>
Genitive "	<i>henos,</i>	<i>mias,</i>	<i>henos.</i>
Dative "	<i>heni,</i>	<i>mia,</i>	<i>heni.</i>
Accusative "	<i>hena,</i>	<i>mian,</i>	<i>hen.</i>

We here find the form, *mian* for which we are seeking. It is in the feminine gender, singular number, and accusative case. In the sentence (page 6) it is the

object after the preposition *eis*. There must be some *noun* in the same *gender*, *number*, and *case*, with which it agrees. Why may it not agree with *sabbaton*, and be rendered "first Sabbath," referring to Sunday, as the novice claims? - Because *sabbaton* is in the *neuter* gender, *plural* number in this instance, and *genitive case*. There is not a single point of agreement. Neither can the word "Sabbath" be supplied, so as to make it read "the first (Sabbath) of (a new series of) Sabbaths," as they again contend; for *mian* and *sabbaton* do not agree in a single point. Nor can they render it "the first of the Sabbath," referring to Sunday, or any other single day; for that would be nonsense. Thus their way is blocked in every direction. What is expressed is "first of the week;" but whenever a division of the week is spoken of, it must refer to its days. "Day" is therefore the word to be supplied. The Greek for day is *hemera*, a noun of the *feminine* gender; and we have but to put it in the *singular* number and *accusative* case, which would be *hemeran*, to make the agreement between it and *mian* complete. Then we have-*eis mian (hemeran) sabbaton*, "to [or toward] the first (day) of the week" -as definite an expression as language can form.

The words, (*opse de*, page 6), translated in the common version "in the end," do not signify that one class of Sabbaths (the seventh day) there came to an

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end, opening the way for another class of Sabbaths (the first day) to be introduced, as some would have us believe. The word *opse* is an adverb, meaning, literally, "late;" but it is a word which the Greeks used with reference to that which *was past*. See all the lexicons with their quotations from classical Greek. Thus, "late of the day," or "on the day," signified, "when the day was *past*." "late of the Sabbath," when "the Sabbath was *past*." By the expression, "now late on the Sabbath day" (Revised Version, Matt. 28:1), the Greek would understand, "now when the Sabbath day was *past*;" and the *opse de sabbaton* (*long "o"*), of Matt. 28:1, is the exact equivalent of *diagenomenou tou sabbaton* (*short "o"*), of Mark 16:1, rendered, "and when the Sabbath was *past*;" for it can not be supposed that Matthew and Mark would contradict each other on so plain and well-known a matter of fact.

No person of acknowledged scholarship is ever found claiming as a just criticism on the Greek construction, that Sunday is called the Sabbath in the Greek; and the criticism herein set forth would not be demanded did not some theological novice, taking counsel of his ignorance, occasionally put forth the claim, and thus confuse the minds of those not acquainted with the Greek. It is hoped that this brief exposure will be sufficient to show such teachers the folly of their course; or, if this may not be, that it will enable every English reader to see why he should reject the groundless claim, and to know for himself that Sunday is never called the Sabbath in the New Testament, either in the English or the Greek.

¹ sabbaton with short "o" is the nominative singular; sabbaton with long "o" is the genitive plural