

"WEEK" AND "THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK" IN THE BIBLE

by J. W. Roberts

A perennial question of N. T. study concerns the meaning of "week" and the "first day of the week." A querist wants further clarification concerning the teaching of Herbert W. Armstrong (cf. **Firm Foundation**, Nov. 28, 1972, p. 5) and this question. The querist points out that though the KJV of John 20:19 reads "on the same day, being the first day of the week," the KJV II reads "Then, it being evening on that day, the **first day of the sabbaths**." Again the KJV II translates Matthew 28:1 "and at the end of the Sabbath, as it were dawning toward the first day of the week," but in Berry's Interlinear Literal Greek the translation is made to read, "Now late on sabbath, as it was getting dusk, toward the first day of (the) week . . ." The observation is made, "In this and in many other cases involving the translations, one is left with the feeling that the Greeks were perhaps incapable of precision of expression! What is the reason for this inability to translate truthfully?"

It is not that the Greek is incapable of precision, but the trouble is with people who translate and interpret the Bible without a clear knowledge of the language or who do so with the coloring from some hobby or false doctrine. Of course, Mr. Armstrong wants to deny that Jesus arose from the dead on the first day of the week. Another trouble here is that the literalist interlinear translations do not really help in an understanding of the original. They are usually overly literalistic, translating words according to strict etymology rather than by what the words mean in the given context. The neophyte in the use of Greek is thus often hindered rather than helped. I suggest sticking with good modern translations and comparing them. A consensus here will nearly always give the correct meaning of the Greek.

The querist is worried because the literal meaning of the text of John 20:19 seems to be or is given as "sabbaths" in the interlinear and the King James II. "Sabbaths" here is the original meaning of the word and not "week;" but that has nothing to do with what the word means in this particular context. A word "means" only what its author intended it to mean or how he used it in a given instance. Let us look at the word for "week."

The regular term for "week" in Hebrew was **shabua**, which means "a seven," that is, a time unit of seven, from **seba**, "seven." The days of the Hebrew week had no names as the Greek and Roman week did. They were simply designated by the numbers 1st, 2nd, 3rd (day) of the "sevens" or week. The final day of the week is called the 7th in many passages (Ex. 20:10; 23:12; 31:15; 34:21, etc.). But because this was a day of rest, it came to be called the "Sabbath" (from **sabat**—rest). The two words were spelled and sounded alike and referred to the same day, so it was natural that they should be confused. The Hebrew word "Sabbath" frequently has the meaning "week" in the O. T. For example, in Isaiah 66:23, "From month to month and **week to week**," the Hebrew has **sabbath to sabbath** and the Greek translation is **sabbaton ek sabbaton**.

The Greeks counted time mostly from the day, month, and year and did not usually reckon days by the week. So there was no regular word in Greek for "week." It was quite natural, therefore, for the Greek translators to take over the word "Sabbath" from the Hebrew for both the meanings "week" and "Sabbath."

The Hebrew word "Sabbath" passed not only into Greek as the word for "week" but also into Aramaic or Syriac (the language spoken in Palestine in the first century A.D.), as well as into Rabbinic Hebrew. The instances are collected in Gustaf Dalman's grammar (**Grammatik des Judisch-Palästinischen Aramäisch**, pp. 247-249).

With this background it is easy to understand the meaning of the N. T. references. Saturday was the sabbath, and the word is to be so understood when it stands alone with nothing to indicate otherwise. Saturday night (after 6 p.m., when the sabbath ended) was to them the night of the first day of the week and was called "the ending of the sabbath," and the next day (our Sunday) was called the "first (day) of the week" (**Mia sabbatou or mia sabbaton**, the Greek word can be singular or plural). Dalman cites instances of the Aramaic *ched' b suba*, "the first (day) of the week" as well as **cheth b stabath**, with both words "rest" and "seventh" meaning "week" (p. 247).

This fits and explains the N. T. uses: Luke 18:12 has the Pharisee say that he fasts twice during the week (**sabatou**; note **sabbatou** is the genitive or possessive case of the word). With this compare the early second-century document **The Didache**, which says that the Jews fast on the second (**deutera**) and the fifth (**pempte**) day the week (**sabbaton**), so Christians should fast on the fourth and sixth (8:1). Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:2 commands that the collection be laid aside upon "every first day of the week" (**kata mian sabbatou**). This expression for Sunday, or the first day of the week, occurs in Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7, and in every case the word for "week" is **sabbaton** either singular or plural. In these expressions the word "day" is usually omitted by ellipsis; it is understood. But the numeral "first" is in the feminine gender to show that the word in ellipsis is **hemera**, the feminine word "day." (The numeral is an adjective, which must agree gender with the word it modifies.) Note that the meaning is clear. It would not make sense to say that someone fasted on the "second", and "fifth" day of the sabbath day! Thus the King James II is misleading when it translates John 20:19, "Then, it being evening on that day, the first of the **sabbaths** . . ."

As for the question about the meaning of Matthew 28:1, which the English translators have had so much trouble with, Berry is paraphrasing by the use of his word "dusk." For a long time modern Greek scholars did not understand the Greek here until the matter was cleared up by the papyri and the study of the Aramaic. Dalman shows (in the grammar quoted above) that the expression in the King James "in the end of the sabbath" (literally in Aramaic "on the 'ending' or 'after' Sabbath") was the literal Jewish expression for the evening following the seventh-day sabbath. This would be the time from 6 p.m. Saturday (when the sabbath ended) on through the night until daylight (which would then be called the first day of the week). Thus the "end of the Sabbath" means during the night after the sabbath. The two Marys came to the tomb early Sunday morning. The word for "end" here is **opse**, and it is well attested in Koine Greek for "after" (cf. Moulton and Milligan, **Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament**). The Standard

Greek-English lexicon of the N. T., Arndt-Gingrich, says the phrase here means "after the sabbath" and gives a list of parallel phrases in contemporary writers. That Christ arose on the first day of the week is proved by Luke 24:1, 13, 21, 44-46. Mark: 16:9 says that he arose on the first day of the week. So all early Christian literature agrees.

— **Firm, Foundation**
February 20, 1973