

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



A Controversial Newsletter "The Printed Voice of Summit Theological Seminary"

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Vol. 29 No. 1

January 2016

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Dear Brother Carter:

"Now on the first [day] of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw [that] the stone had been taken away from the tomb" **John 20:1** NKJV

In my local congregation, they are moving to a Saturday evening communion. I have always used **Acts 20:7** to argue that we are to observe the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week; which is Sunday.

"Now on the first [day] of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight." **Acts 20:7** NKJV

But when I looked this verse up in my Greek interlinear, I found that the Greek literally reads, "The first of the Sabbaths". All my English translations read, "On the first day of the week". Is my interlinear wrong or are my English translations in error?

Brother Carter's Answer:

The short answer is that neither your Greek interlinear, nor your English translations are wrong. Both are correct. This is actually a great example of how a literal translation of the Greek can be confusing to English readers of Scripture. What we actually have here is a Hebrew way of speaking about the first day of the week. Greek scholars know this well, which is why they all translate it as "the first day of the week". That is an accurate translation of this idiomatic phrase.

Vincent's Word Studies says of the word "*sabbaton*" in this verse, "the plural used for the singular, in imitation of the Hebrew form. The noun *Sabbath* is often used after numerals in signification of a week. See **Matthew xxviii. 1; Mark xvi. 2; John xx. 19.**"

Interestingly, both of my Greek interlinear New Testaments actually show "week" as the "literal" translation of "*sabbaton*" in all three of the passages that Vincent references above. The same phrase found in the Greek in **Acts 20:7** is also found in **Luke 24:1** in reference to the resurrection of Christ. In this passage my Greek interlinear New Testaments also show "week" as the "literal" translation of "*sabbaton*". Again, the English

translations are virtually unanimous in translating it as "the first day of the week", here as well.

"Now on the first [day] of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain [other] [women] with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared" **Luke 24:1** NKJV

Further, in **I Corinthians 16:2** the word "*sabbaton*" is "literally" translated "week" in both of my Greek interlinear New Testaments as well as virtually all English translations. This is also true of **John 20:1**, "Now on the first [day] of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw [that] the stone had been taken away from the tomb" NKJV

"On the first [day] of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come." **I Corinthians 16:2** NKJV

Vine's Expository Dictionary notes that "*sabbaton*" is found in "**Luke 18:12**, 'twice in the week,' lit. 'twice of the Sabbath,' i.e., twice in the days after the Sabbath." Under the entry for "one" under the Greek word "*heis*", it says, "'the first day of the week,' Lit. and idiomatically, 'one of the Sabbaths,' signifying 'the first day after the Sabbath, e.g. **Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 16:2.**"

The reference to **Luke 18:12** is interesting. "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." NKJV

The Greek literally reads, "twice of the Sabbath" but it is translated as, "twice a week". In fact, the "literal" translation of "*sabbaton*" here is given as "week" in both my Greek interlinear New Testaments as well. Was this Pharisee really trying to say that he fasted twice on the Sabbath? If so, they couldn't be very long fasts. You can't fast more than once in a day without eating at least twice that day. This doesn't seem very impressive or like much of a sacrifice to me.

Thayer's Greek Lexicon gives, "seven days, a week" as one of the definitions for "*sabbaton*". Strong's does this as well. Thayer's goes on to say that the phrase found in **Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1,19, and Acts 20:7** as equivalent to "the first day after the

Sabbath". This, of course, would be the first day of the week.

Robertson's Word Pictures also comments that either the singular or the plural, "was used for the week (Sabbath to Sabbath)".

Even Wikipedia says, "In Jewish sources by the time of the Septuagint, the term "Sabbath" (Greek "*Sabbaton*") by synecdoche also came to refer to an entire seven-day week, the interval between two weekly Sabbaths." (Article on "*Week*")

Most commentators do not even mention this since it is a translation issue that is well understood and universally agreed upon by the Greek scholars. It is simply a non-issue to the commentators.

In case this does not convince you that the phrase means, "the first day of the week", consider **Matthew 28:1**, "Now after the Sabbath, as the first [day] of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb." NKJV

The Greek literally says, "After the Sabbath, to the dawning into the first Sabbath". But it is translated, "Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn" in my NKJV. The word "*sabbaton*" is translated "Sabbath" in the first instance, but "week" in the second. This is because of the idiom, or figure of speech, that we have been discussing. However, it shows clearly that such must be the case. The literal translation actually makes no sense. How can it dawn into the Sabbath after the Sabbath? Clearly it is the first day of the week that dawns after the Sabbath.

You can see a similar thing in **Mark 16:1-2**, "Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary [the] [mother] of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. 2 Very early in the morning, on the first [day] of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen." NKJV

Verse one says that the Sabbath was past. Verse two says it was "very early in the morning on the first day of the week". The word for "week" here is "*sabbaton*" in verse two, as is the word for "Sabbath" in verse one. Once again, if we must translate "*sabbaton*" as "Sabbath" we have a problem. How can it be early on the Sabbath when the Sabbath was past? Obviously it cannot.

This question illustrates beautifully how a strictly literal, word for word, translation of the Greek can be confusing and even fail to be accurate. Translators must be aware of idioms as they do their work and reflect the meaning accurately into the target language rather than the rough equivalent of individual words. It is not always true that a literal translation is the most accurate or even the best.

I would like to mention that when our churches try to twist **Acts 20:7** into a Saturday evening observance of the Lord's Supper, they are guilty of the same error as the

cults. The Seventh Day Adventists have always maintained that we ought to worship on the Sabbath. The Messianic Jews also argue this way. In fact, I have seen them argue in print that we ought to worship on Saturday because of the literal reading of the Greek in this verse. When we adopt their arguments for our own purposes, we are keeping company with the cults and Judaizers rather than the New Testament Church.

In the words of Paul, "Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits." **I Corinthians 15:33** NKJV

If the cults and "progressives" among us are correct, then we have been doing it all wrong for centuries. B.W. Johnson comments, regarding **Acts 20:7**, in the People's New Testament that, "...the early church writers from Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, to Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Cyprian, all with one consent, declare that the Church observed the first day of the week. They are equally agreed that the Lord's Supper was observed weekly, on the first day of the week."

Finally, I would mention that some argue that **Acts 20:7** was based on Jewish time, thus their first day of the week would correspond to our Saturday evening and end on our Sunday evening. There are a few things to note about this:

1. The only time they want to follow Jewish time is in observing the Lord's Supper. If we are to observe Jewish time here, why not the rest of the time?
2. If we were meant to follow Jewish time in observing the Lord's Supper, God would have made that plain to us. What was made plain is not whether it was Greek, Roman, or Jewish time, but that it was the first day of the week. That is when they met to observe the Lord's Supper. I suggest we do the same.
3. It is obvious that their conclusion that it was Jewish time is not based on the text itself, but rather on their own convenience.
4. Why would the Church in Troas, which was a Hellenistic city, be observing Jewish time? There is not even any mention of a Jewish synagogue in this city in the New Testament. There is simply no basis for the assumption that this church would have observed Jewish time in regards to the Lord's Supper. In the words of Paul to Peter, "...why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?" **Galatians 2:14**.
5. If this is Jewish time, and we are to observe it under Jewish time, then those who have partaken after sunset Sunday evening have been wrong for centuries.
6. Notice that the verse itself says that Paul was ready to depart "the next day". Verse 11 tells us that Paul departed at "daybreak". If this is all Jewish time, and thus the first day of the week runs from sunset of our Saturday till sunset of our Sunday, how could daybreak be the next day? Under Jewish time it would be the same day. It is true that "the next day" could simply refer to daylight. However, this seems to argue against their position that it was Jewish time.

7. If I am asked to speak in a particular city at 7:00 P.M., all parties understand that this is their local time. That may or may not be the same as 7:00 P.M. at my home. But that is irrelevant. Should we observe the Lord's Supper according to Troas time? Certainly not. Clearly we are to follow our local time zone. Thus it seems obvious that we ought to also follow our local time as to when the first day of the week begins and ends. If we are to follow our local time zone as to the hour of the day, why wouldn't we follow it in regards to the day of the week?
8. It should also be noted that at this time, Greek, Roman, and Jews all observed a seven day week. (Some have argued that it must be Jewish time because only Jews had a seven day week at this time.) Consider the following quote from Wikipedia's article on "Week":

"The seven-day week seems to have been adopted (independently) by the Persian Empire, in Judaism and in Hellenistic astrology, and (via Greek transmission) in Gupta India and Tang China. The Babylonian system was received by the Greeks in the 4th century BC (notably via Eudoxus of Cnidus)...It was widely known throughout the Roman Empire by the 1st century AD...The ancient Romans traditionally used the eight-day nundinal cycle, but after the Julian calendar had come into effect in 45 BC, the seven-day week came into use."