

## The Idiomatic Use of *Sabbaton* for Week

Written by Jerry Griffin

**Q. Why is the Greek word *sabbaton* translated "Sabbath" in most places, but "week" in Acts 20:7, as in the phrase, "on the first day of the week"? Is there a definite grammatical construct (with the word *mia* or *mian*—translated "one" or "first") that requires "week" in this and other similar texts? Or is it possible to translate this phrase as "on one of the Sabbaths"?**

**A.** In English versions of the New Testament, the word *sabbaton* is properly translated as "week" in nine texts, eight of which refer to "the first day of the week."<sup>1</sup> The phrase in question is an idiomatic expression that does require a different translation of *sabbaton* from the usual meaning of "Sabbath." Here's why.

First, the Jews of antiquity had no names for the days of the week, except for the sixth and seventh days. The seventh day, of course, was called the Sabbath (*shabbat* or *sabbaton* in Hebrew and Greek, respectively). The sixth day had two primary designations: (1) the "day before the Sabbath" (*ereb shabbat* or *prosabbaton* in Hebrew and Greek, respectively), and (2) the "preparation" for the Sabbath (*paraskeue* in Greek). The other days of the week were simply numbered by using the Sabbath as a reference point. Thus, Sunday was "[day] one after the Sabbath," Monday was "[day] two after the Sabbath," etc. We know that this was the Jewish method of reckoning based on a variety of references in both biblical and extra-biblical writings dating from c. 300 BC to AD 200.<sup>2</sup>

Second, the original authors of the New Testament converted the common Jewish way of referring to the days of the week into equivalent Greek phrases. Therefore, if we are to properly translate those phrases today, we need a basic understanding of Greek grammar and syntax, particularly the rules that govern nouns and adjectives. It's a mistake to assume that the Greek and English languages operate in identical ways. They don't. The two systems are fundamentally different, particularly in regard to **syntax** (how words are put together in a phrase or sentence to communicate their relationship and meaning to one another).

English syntax is dependent on word order. The typical word order for an English sentence is subject, verb, and object. For example, "The boy (subject) hit (verb) the ball (object)." Switch the words for subject and object and the meaning of the sentence changes: "The ball hit the boy." Jumble the word order and the sentence becomes ambiguous or makes no sense at all: "The hit ball the boy." (Notice also that the spelling of "boy" and "ball" does not change, regardless if either word serves as the subject or object. Grammatically speaking, their inflectional forms remain the same.) In English, therefore, word position, rather than inflectional form, is the key to understanding a phrase or sentence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:12 is the one text of the nine that does not refer to "the first day of the week." Instead, this text is part of the prayer of the Pharisee who boasts, "I fast twice in the week." The key Greek phrase in this verse is: *dis tou sabbatou*. Obviously, the use of *sabbatou* here does not refer to the seventh-day Sabbath for several reasons. (1) Fasting would imply refraining from food at least for a day. Thus, for someone to say, "I fast twice on the Sabbath," would be nonsensical. Fasting, then eating, then fasting again all on the same day would not really be fasting, but rather normal behavior. (2) Fasting on the Sabbath at all, much less twice (even if it were possible), would have been unheard of in Jesus' day. The Jewish practice, and that of the Pharisees in particular, was to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, that is, "twice a week," just as the prayer of this Pharisee declares. It is clear, therefore, from both the literary and historical contexts of this passage that *sabbatou* is being used idiomatically to mean "of the seven," or as we would say today, "week." We should also carefully note that the reference here is to the week in general (i.e. the weekly timeframe as a whole), rather than to one particular day of the week, as in the other eight texts that specifically speak of "the first day of the week." This distinction confirms all the more that the word for sabbath, depending of its usage and context, did have an idiomatic meaning in addition to its standard one.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include: (1) the Septuagint's superscriptions over Psalms 91, 92, and 93; (2) Judith 8:6; (3) 2 Maccabees 8:26, 27; (4) Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XVI, Chapter VI, Section 2; and (5) The Didache 8:1 (in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, p. 379). See also: (1) *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1948), Vol. 4, p. 151 under the heading of "Ereb" and Vol. 10, p. 482 under the heading of "Week." (2) *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Tyndale House, 1980), Vol. 1, p. 225, par. 2, under the heading of "Calendar." The same information is also in *The New Bible Dictionary* (IVP and Eerdmans, 1979), a one-volume version of *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.

In contrast, Greek syntax is not dependent on word order, but rather on the **inflections** (predetermined sets of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes) that are added to word-stems. It is these variations in a word's spelling that determine its function in the sentence. Change a prefix or suffix on a word-stem and you literally change its usage and meaning. For example, the stem of the Greek word for "day" is *h ēmer*. Adding the inflectional ending "a" to the stem forms *h ēmera*, which indicates the nominative, singular, feminine form of the word—the form to use if "day" were the subject of a sentence. By contrast, adding the inflectional ending of "an" to the same stem forms *h ēmeran*, which indicates the accusative, singular, feminine form of the word—the form to use if "day" were the direct object of a sentence. Noun-stems like *h ēmer* will have at least eight possible endings, with each one indicating a different grammatical usage. (Some words have fewer forms. Some, like prepositions and conjunctions, have only one. And, some, like most verbs, can have well over a hundred.)

In Greek, therefore, it's the inflection, rather than the position, that determines a word's specific function. This system makes it possible for words to appear anywhere in the sentence without confusing the meaning. What might read like a jumbled sentence in English would make perfect sense in Greek because each word carries its own grammatical identification.

To further compensate for the apparent lack of word order, Greek grammar also employs a special rule: **the rule of concord**. This rule states, among other things, that the definite article ("the"), adjectives, and any other modifiers of a noun must agree with the case, number, and gender of that noun. In other words, the inflectional form of the definite article (and there are 24 different possibilities), or the inflectional form of an adjective or some other modifier will match the inflectional form of the noun. (When spoken, the concord between a noun and its matching article or modifier will often, but not always, have a rhyming sound, like *t ōn sabbat ōn*.) This is the only way to tell which articles, adjectives, and modifiers go with which nouns and, conversely, which do not. This rule has particular relevance to the question at hand.

So, with this necessary information about inflections and the rule of concord in mind, we are now prepared to examine the Greek wording in Acts 20:7 and the other "first-day-of-the-week" texts. The Greek phrase in Acts 20:7 reads: Ἐν δε τη μια των σαββατων. The equivalent English transliteration is: *'En de t ē mia t ōn sabbat ōn*. The first two words, *'en de*, are a preposition and a particle, which can be translated as "and on...."

The next two words, *τη μια* or *t ē mia*, are a form of the definite article ("the") and a form of the cardinal number for "one," which functions like an adjective or modifier in this phrase. This adjectival use of *mia* or "one" is so common that it's completely unnecessary to speak or write the word it modifies. That unwritten word is "day." In English, we also use the same type of verbal shorthand in expressions like "The bill is due on the first of the month." Of course, we mean the "first [day] of the month," even though that word remains unspoken.

But how do we know for sure that there is an unspoken, yet understood, word in Acts 20:7, and that the word is in fact, "day"? Why can't *mia* or "one" be modifying the word *sabbat ōn* instead? And, therefore, why isn't the proper translation "on one of the Sabbaths," as some suppose? The answers are all found in the Greek inflectional system and the rule of concord.

Based on their inflectional endings, the words *τη μια* (*t ē mia*) are both dative, singular, feminine, while the words *των σαββατων* (*t ōn sabbat ōn*) are both genitive, plural, neuter. These two pairs of words, therefore, are completely different in case, number, and gender. In other words, their grammatical forms are not in concord or agreement. Therefore, the word *mia* cannot be modifying or pointing to the word *sabbat ōn*, as in the phrase "on one of the Sabbaths." If that were the case, then the word for "one" would also need to be in its neuter form (*'ενι* or *heni*) to match the neuter gender of *σαββατων* or *sabbat ōn*. The phrase would then look like this: *'εν 'ενι των σαββατων* or *en heni t ōn sabbat ōn* ("on one of the Sabbaths"). This is just another example of how the English and Greek languages are different. In English, we have and need only one grammatical form for the numeral "one." In Greek, however, the numeral "one" has 12 forms to match all the possible combinations of case and gender of every conceivable noun it could modify.

This rules out *t ē mia* modifying *t ōn sabbat ōn*, but how does it point to the word "day" as the implied or unspoken term? As mentioned above, the Greek word for "day" is *h ēmera*, which also happens to be feminine in gender. Any modifiers of *h ēmera*, therefore, would also need to be in feminine form as well. And that's exactly what we find in *t ē mia*. These two singular, feminine forms of "the" and "one" are modifying the singular, feminine form of *h ēmera*, even though that word is not explicitly stated. The singular, feminine forms of the modifiers (*t ē mia*) imply the singular, feminine form of "day" (*h ēmera*). In other words, "day" is clearly understood from the inflectional form of the modifiers.

Therefore, in the phrase *t ē mia t ōn sabbat ōn*, *t ē mia* can only mean “the [day] one.” The words *t ōn sabbat ōn*, as mentioned above, are the genitive, plural, neuter forms of “the” and “sabbaths.” In Greek, articles and nouns in the genitive case can indicate possession, description, or separation. Because most genitives express possession, a common rendering of *t ōn sabbat ōn* is “of the sabbaths,” with the complete phrase being “the [day] one of the sabbaths” or, idiomatically expressed as, “the [day] one of the sevens” or “the [day] one of the week.” Technically, however, *t ōn sabbat ōn* is not a simple possessive, but rather another use of the genitive known as ablative. The ablative use of the genitive indicates the idea of separation, that is, that something is “away from, following, or after” something else. Therefore, a more accurate translation of the phrase would be “the [day] one *following or after* the sabbaths.”

If you’ll recall, we began this explanation by noting the common Jewish idiom for the days of the week. We’ve now come full circle. The phrase, *t ē mia t ōn sabbat ōn*, is nothing more than the Greek equivalent of the Jewish method of counting Sunday as “day one after the Sabbath.”

Before concluding, however, a few comments about variations in the wording of this idiom might be helpful. Six of the eight “first-day-of-the-week” texts use the genitive plural form *sabbat ōn* (see Mt. 28:1; Mk. 6:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7). The plural form is further indication of an idiomatic usage, rather than the word’s normal definition. If a single “Sabbath day” were meant, then the plural form would not be needed. All six of the references that use the plural *sabbat ōn* are from the four Gospel writers. Two of the eight texts, however, use the genitive singular form, *sabbatou*, instead of the genitive plural *sabbat ōn* (see 1 Cor. 16:2 and Mk. 16:9). The first of these is from the pen of Paul and the second is part of a traditional ending that was added to the original Gospel of Mark by an anonymous author. The use of the singular genitive, rather than the plural genitive, represents nothing more than an individual preference in the writing styles of these two authors. There is no difference in meaning; the basic grammatical and idiomatic structure is the same as that in the other “first-day-of-the-week” texts.

Other variations involve the numeral. Five of the eight texts use the numeral “one” in its dative, singular, feminine form: *mia* (Mk. 16:2; Lk. 24:1; Jn. 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7). Two of the eight texts (Mt. 28:1 and 1 Cor. 16:2) use the same numeral, but in its accusative, singular, feminine form: *mian*. The reason for this variation lies in the prepositions used at the beginning of the idiomatic phrase. In Greek, certain prepositions can only be used with certain cases. Without going into detail, the prepositions in Mt. 28:1 and 1 Cor. 16:2 (*eis* and *kata*, respectively) require that the numeral “one” be in the accusative case: *mian*. It should be noted, however, that although *mia* and *mian* are in different cases (dative and accusative, respectively), both forms are still feminine in gender and, therefore, both agree with and modify the unspoken, yet understood, word for “day” (*h ēmera*), which is also feminine in gender.

The remaining text of the eight, Mk. 16:9, is the only one that uses the ordinal numeral, *pr ōt ē* (“first”), instead of the cardinal numeral, *mia* (“one”). Here the phrase is *pr ōt ē sabbatou*. The grammatical structure, however, follows the same rules as the other texts. The case, number, and gender of *pr ōt ē* is in concord with the case, number, and gender of the understood word for “day” (*h ēmera*). But *sabbatou* has a different case and gender and, therefore, cannot be grammatically connected to *pr ōt ē*. Literally translated, *pr ōt ē sabbatou* means “first [day] after [the] sabbath.” The use of *pr ōt ē* (“first”), instead of *mia* (“one”), is simply another example of the particular writing style of the anonymous author of the traditional ending of Mark 16 (vs. 9-20).

Finally, I realize that a barrage of grammatical information can be a bit overwhelming. The point, however, has not been to make one’s eyes glaze over, but rather to demonstrate some of the basics involved in proper translation. Without a working knowledge of Greek grammar and how it differs from English, one can easily jump to the wrong conclusions. This is especially true when looking at the Greek and English lines of an Interlinear. It’s a common mistake to assume that the English words underneath the Greek words read just like the Greek does. Actually, each English word is only a translation of the word directly above it. In other words, it’s a translation of a single word at a time, rather than a formal translation of an entire Greek sentence. Due to the differences in syntax, the individual English words are missing the grammatical, inflectional, and syntactical connections that only the corresponding Greek words can supply.

This is why some misread the Interlinear at Acts 20:7. They assume from the order of the English words that the Greek says, “on one of the sabbaths.” But as shown above, the Greek grammar and syntax clarifies the meaning. The proper translation is “on [day] one after the sabbath,” or as we would say today, “on the first day of the week.” So, as fine a tool as the Interlinear is for matching a single Greek word to a single English equivalent, some knowledge of Greek grammar is still required, especially when it involves translating the particular idiom in Acts 20:7 and similar texts:

τη [ἡμέρα] μιὰ τῶν σαββάτων — “day one after the sabbath.”