



Conducted by
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“Could you qualify the phrase the ‘first day of the week’? Our pioneers always practised the breaking of bread every Sunday morning or afternoon at the latest. Now in some of our Churches Sunday evening communion is held. Is this correct scripturally?”

Old Testament Reckoning of Time

IT is not quite so easy to define exactly when the first day of the week begins and ends, as is apparent when we consider the matter; but perhaps our best approach to an answer would be to consider briefly from Genesis onward the use given to the term “day.”

“Day” is used sometimes to denote a period of twenty-four hours that make a complete day (Gen. 1:5 etc.)—notice that “the evening and the morning were the first day” (evening *preceding* morning and both fusing to form one day). The hours of *light*, as contrasted with the night, the time of darkness, are called “day” (Gen. 1:5; Psalm 121:6 etc.). The time at which something special happened is sometimes referred to as a day, *i.e.* “the day of calamity” (2 Sam. 22:19). *Periods* of time are called “days” as “in the days of Herod the King” (Matt. 2:1).

The day is one of the commonest and most basic divisions of time dating, as we have seen, from the dawn of time in Genesis. It marks an entire revolution of time, *i.e.* a period of twenty-four hours and, as remarked above, it appears that in reckoning a day one commences at the sunset of the previous evening. Such in the process of time became the *Jewish* method of reckoning and this can be illustrated by one example taken from Lev. 23:32: “. . . from even unto even shall ye celebrate your sabbath,” and also in regard to the paschal feast which was appointed to commence on the 15th day of the month, immediately after sunset on the 14th (Ex. 12:18). There seems no reason for believing that this rule did not also obtain with regard to all other days.

In the early periods of Old Testament history no divisions of the natural day appear other than those of morning, noonday, evening and midnight (Gen. 1:5, 43:16;

Ex. 11:4). The night, in like manner, appears under a threefold division of first, middle and morning watches (Lam. 2:19; Judges 7:19; Ex. 14:24). The mention of *hours* first occurs during the time of the Babylonish captivity (Dan. 3:6) and the Babylonians and the Hebrews, it is said, were probably first to divide the day into twelve hours or equal portions; in the New Testament we read of the third, sixth and ninth hours of the day—which were the more marked divisions of the twelve.

“Sunset” and “sunrise” are of course natural phenomena and vague terms with regard to time. Such terms are not exact enough for civilised and sophisticated nations to use with reference to time, and so men fell upon the plan for adopting midnight as the fixed point from which a day’s revolution would be reckoned. One can imagine the chaos if, for instance, a factory owner arranged for his workers to commence work at “sunrise.” They would come straggling in at various times, depending on their interpretations of “sunrise,” and so the employer fixes a time of say 6.30 a.m. in preference to sunrise. Life’s arrangements are now governed by punctual regard to and careful consideration of hours and minutes (and in the case of astronauts, tiny fractions of a second). The greater part of the civilised world has now adopted this practice of counting time from midnight to midnight, although in places where time is regarded as being of less importance, as in some parts of the Near and Far East, the old mode of reckoning time from sunset to sunset continues.

New Testament Reckoning of Time

In John 11:9 Jesus is recorded as saying “Are there not twelve hours in the day . . . ?” thus recognising the fact that the day (in contrast to the night) was divided into twelve hours and when we add to this information such terms as the “third,” “sixth” and “ninth hours” of the day we can see that the twelve hours mentioned by Jesus were from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Jesus was crucified about the third hour of the day (Mark 15:25) which was 9 a.m.—witness Acts 2:15, where Peter says, “for these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.” Darkness prevailed over the earth at Jesus’ crucifixion from the sixth hour to the ninth hour (Matt. 27:45) or our noon to 3 p.m. Jesus would be buried somewhere between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., probably nearer to 6 p.m. If the *day* of twelve hours began at 6 a.m. and lasted to 6 p.m. then *night* must have begun at 6 p.m. and finished at 6 a.m. Jesus was three days and three nights in the grave and rose upon *the first day of the week*—Mark 16:9 says, “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week he appeared first unto Mary Magdalene out of whom He had cast seven devils.” If Jesus rose the third day as He said He would, and He was in the grave three days and nights, then He must have risen about 6 a.m. on the Sunday and been buried about 6 p.m. on the Thursday evening. This issue is of course surrounded by controversy, in view of the Jewish reckoning of part of a day as a day, but the point I am trying to make is that if the *day* began at 6 a.m. and the *night* began at 6 p.m. then the first *day* of the week (on which Jesus rose) began at 6 a.m. It all depends upon how we believe that time then was computed and I do not believe that one can be quite dogmatic on the matter. Take for instance the quotation I gave from Mark 15:25, which states that Jesus was crucified at the *3rd* hour, yet in John 19:14 we read at the *6th* hour Pilate presented Jesus to the people and said “Behold your king.” This is just another example of counting time not from 6 p.m. to 6 p.m. but midnight to midnight as we do.

Jewish or Roman Reckoning ?

The crux of the matter as far as our question is concerned is whether we are to compute the first day of the week from the evening of Saturday to the evening of Sunday, or to measure it in some other way, *e.g.* the way we measure every other day—from midnight to midnight. Perhaps the importance of the problem wanes a little when we consider that the first day of the week for Chinese Christians differs from our own and that in different parts of the world there is all the time this disparity. Are we expected, being in the Christian economy, to be any longer subject to a *Jewish* reckoning of time, or can we follow the then Roman (and now European) computation of a day, *i.e.* from midnight to midnight ?

I personally would not be happy in breaking bread on the Saturday evening (as being the first day of the week), and while this may be partly or wholly due to prejudice on my part I cannot help recalling the passage in Matt. 28:1: "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre." When these two women came it was yet dark but was beginning to *dawn* towards the first day of the week. To "dawn towards the first day of the week" seems to me to indicate that the first day of the week had not yet begun but commenced at dawn.

Take also the fact that the church is said to have begun on the first day of the week—the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:1 says: "When the day of Pentecost was *fully* come . . ." and when we relate this to the Old Testament reference to this day we read in Lev. 23:15, 16: "And ye shall count unto you *from the morrow after the sabbath*, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: even unto the *morrow after* the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the Lord."

We may feel justified perhaps therefore in reckoning the first day of the week as beginning on the morrow after the sabbath or *at dawn*, as it dawns towards the first day of the week, but I don't see that we could insist in the matter. *If* we are going to use the Jewish reckoning of time (*i.e.* from sunset to sunset) we could break bread from 6 p.m. on the Saturday evening to 6 p.m. on the Sunday evening. If we are going to comply with our own and the ancient Roman computation of time (*i.e.* from midnight to midnight) then (as per the question) we could break bread on the Sunday morning, afternoon or *evening*. Similarly if we believe that the first day of the week commenced at dawn (as per Matt. 28:1) we can break bread morning, afternoon or evening of Sunday.

I hope this has not made "confusion more confounded," but has provided a rough basis for further meditations and study.