

Some texts about the Sabbath were never properly translated

The author, a 60-year-old former IT manager, holds degrees in town planning, the history and philosophy of science, and computing studies. He and his wife, Cindy, live in Australia's capital, Canberra, where for 11 years they have been part of a small, independent Sabbath group.

This article is based on a conference Mr. Steensby attended in 1996, the writer's personal communications with a conference speaker and some excerpts from the speaker's notes.

By Walter Steensby

CANBERRA, Australia--Conferences supply the occasional surprise, and the first Friends of the Sabbath conference in Sydney held 13 years ago, in July 1996, certainly provided one.

Gerhard Kemmerer, graying, lean, spoke quietly and earnestly in fluent German-accented English. He claimed that certain passages in the Bible had never been correctly translated into English and yet are of crucial importance in dealing with the question of the Sabbath and its position in the New Testament.

In researching this matter, he had not revealed a new truth. Rather, he found something neglected by Christianity for centuries and whose implications are profound.

His rediscovery answered all the questions regarding the position of the Sabbath in the New Testament and all arguments about just what was the first day of the week as far as the biblical writers were concerned.

It should, he optimistically stated, "stop dogfights and strengthen the position of Sabbath-keepers in the world."

Nine texts with a problem

There are nine texts in the English translation of the New Testament where the Greek word *sabbaton*, the word for "sabbath," is usually translated as "week." This is odd because Greek has a perfectly good word for week, *hebdomas*. If the writers meant *week*, why not use *hebdomas*?

The first eight of the nine are Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1 and 19, Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2.

The Greek phrase is variously *mian sabbato⁻n*, *mias sabbato⁻n* and *mia to⁻n sabbato⁻n*, all of which, while grammatically a little different, are equivalent in meaning and all of which are commonly translated as "on the first [day] of the

week." The *literal* translation, however, is "[on] one of the sabbaths."

The other passage is Luke 18:12, where *dis tou sabbatou* has been translated "twice in the week" when the literal translation is "twice of the sabbath."

The problem grows when we consider that *mia* (pronounced *mee-a*) is the feminine form of *one* and can refer only to a feminine noun, while *sabbaton* is neuter and hence requires *heni*, the neuter form of *one*.

In modern Greece when ordering a beer you ask for *mia beera parakalo*--one beer, please--because beer is feminine. (If you're wondering, the masculine form of *one* is *heis*, pronounced *hice*.)

Not Greek at all

It is simply not correct to translate the eight phrases as "on the first [day] of the week" because that rendering would require the Greek to be *prote to n sabbato n* (which is also neuter).

Nor is it correct to translate them as "on the first [day] after the sabbath" because the Greek would then have to read *meta ton sabbaton* or, by analogy to Matthew 27:62, *te [hemera] epaurion tou sabbatou*.

To use "on Sunday" ignores the original wording altogether and is no translation. It is evident that *mia to n sabbato n* is not a Greek phrase at all.

The translation "on the first day of the week" is currently widespread and grammatically is the only correct one, but it would be interesting to know why the mistranslation was made in the first place.

This is especially so when we consider that in other parts of Matthew 28, Mark 16 and Luke 24 the same word, *shabbat*, is correctly translated as "sabbath."

Seven years of research

Mr. Kemmerer spent two years researching this problem using conventional resources--textbooks, commentaries, dictionaries--and found no translations that made sense.

He spent five more years going back to the original Hebrew biblical sources and to the extrabiblical: the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim, the great commentators of Israel.

(Gerhard told me he found this material marvelous to read and Hebrew an easy language to learn.)

Remembering the Sabbath day

In Exodus 31 we read that the Sabbath is a perpetual sign of God's covenant, a very close relationship between God and His people, a sign of Creator and created for all eternity.

Exodus 20:8 emphasizes our need to remember the Sabbath day. How shall we comply? By remembering it during the course of the week.

From the Septuagint we learn quickly that the day before the Sabbath was named *prosabbaton* (before-sabbath) or *paraskeue* (preparation), and the day after was *opse sabbato* (after sabbath) or *mia to* *n sabbato* *n*--and this is all we learn. There are no parallels for the mysterious *mia to* *n sabbato* *n* in either the Hebrew Bible or the Targum (Aramaic Bible).

Mr. Kemmerer's hunch, his theory, was that, as the days immediately next to the Sabbath are named and seemingly numbered in relation to it, so were all the other days of the week.

Hebrew's days are numbered

Further, he postulated that this scheme must have something to do with the Fourth Commandment: to remember the Sabbath day.

By combining references in the Septuagint, the lists of the Psalms of the Day (the *Shir Shel Yom*) in the writings of Maimonides and the list in the Talmud Bavli, Gerhard completed a table showing the Hebrew terms for the days of the week in relation to the Sabbath.

o Friday was *ereb* (eve of) *shabbat*, which denotes the eve going *into* the Sabbath, *not* the end of the Sabbath.

o Saturday, of course, was just plain *shabbat*.

o Sunday has two names: *motzaey* (the outgoings, or exits, of or from) *shabbat* and *echad* ("one") *b'shabbat*.

Motzaey (pronounced *motsa-eh*) as used in Hebrew literature is interesting. Apart from meaning the termination of the Sabbath, it can refer to the entire day following the Sabbath day and to the entire year following the sabbatical year.

o Monday is *sheni* (second) *b'shabbat*, Tuesday *shelishi* (third) *b'shabbat*, Wednesday *rebi'i* (fourth) *b'shabbat* and Thursday *chamishi* (fifth) *b'shabbat*.

Literal translation

What is this term *b'shabbat*, consisting of the preposition *b'* (*beth*) plus *shabbat*?

To answer that, first consider that the Greek *mia to* *n sabbato* *n* is evidently a direct, literal translation of *echad b'shabbat*, where again we see that theologians

and translators have crossed out *shabbat* and substituted *week* to produce "first of the week."

Why? Like Greek, Hebrew has a perfectly good word for *week*, which is *shabúa*, so the translators could have used that word.

The ancients meant what they wrote, and Gerhard was adamant that we should not try to force our 20th- and 21st-century and Christian concepts into their thinking. We must read *out* of the text and not *into* the text.

The preposition 'beth'

He found that the answer to the problem lies not in changing *shabbat* to *week* but rather in the proper interpretation and translation of the preposition *beth*.

Of all Semitic prepositions, *beth* has the widest range of meanings, and the rabbis have arranged these meanings into three simple and logical groups.

o The first meaning is the usual one of "in and on a place or time." This the rabbis label the "*beth* of vessel" (*beth haKeli*), with the meaning of "in."

o The second meaning derives from observing that, if something is in the same place as something else, it is often also *close* to it.

This is labeled either the "*beth* of nearness and attachment" or the "*beth* of reference and relation" (*beth haNegi'ah v'haDibbuk*), with the meaning of "at."

o The third meaning comes from noticing that something close to you can also be of help to you, thus we have the "*beth* of help" (*beth haEzer*), meaning "with" or "by" and indicating means, agency or instrument.

One meaning *beth* never has is "after," so a translation such as "[the day] after the Sabbath" is not correct.

(Here Gerhard's stage assistant displayed an overhead transparency of Hebrew text upside down, provoking laughter from the audience. Never mind, said Gerhard. When he had visited the august National Library in Canberra he had found all the Hebrew books upside-down. More laughter.)

To translate the weekday names using only the first *beth* leads to terms such as "one in sabbath" and "two on sabbath," which make no sense. The third *beth* leads to terms like "third with sabbath" and "fourth by sabbath" that are no clearer.

Up for the count

However, if we use the second *beth* we end up naming the weekdays by counting them *in relation to* or *in conjunction with* the Sabbath, such as "one in

relation to [the] sabbath" or "fourth in relation to [the] sabbath."

This usage is found in the Tanakh and is widespread in extrabiblical Hebrew literature. But for some reason these meanings have not entered the dictionaries or the grammars.

Why? Gerhard mused it may be because doing so keeps the Sabbath out of sight, in effect eliminating it, and produces notions about the early roots of Sunday-keeping in the Christian church.

In the Talmud he found hundreds of examples of the second *beth*. As just one, consider the phrase *b'hazaytim*, consisting of *b'* (*beth*) + *ha* (the) + *zaytim* (olive trees).

If we use the first *beth*, it translates as "in the olive trees," perhaps referring to a bird's nest.

If we use the second *beth* it now means a matter or a statement concerning the olive trees, perhaps a regulation in connection with them--and this is how the rabbis consistently use the *beth*.

Help recalling

A somewhat lengthy but helpful way of remembering how the Jews named the weekdays is to think of Monday--*sheni b'shabbat*, "second in relation to the sabbath"--as being "the second day in the sequence of days leading to the sabbath."

Similarly, Wednesday--*rebi'i b'shabbat*, "fourth in relation to the sabbath"--can be thought of as "the fourth day in the sequence of days leading to the sabbath," and so on.

The whole matter is nothing but a practical application of the Fourth Commandment. The Talmud seems to take this for granted; it gives no explanation.

The commentators are more explicit. For example, Rashi as quoted by Nachmanides in the commentary on the Torah:

"You should not count [the weekdays] as others count them, but you [Israel] should count them with reference to the Sabbath [*l'shem shabbat*]."

Many nations deal with the weekdays on an individual basis, giving each day its own name, perhaps that of a mythological god.

As a contrary example, Portuguese is a language in which most of the days of the week are numbered, and correctly so from a Sabbatarian perspective.

Sunday is *domingo*, Monday *segunda-feira* or just *segunda* (literally *second*), Tuesday *terça*, Wednesday *quarta*, Thursday *quinta*, Friday *sexta* and Saturday *sabádo*.

Matthew 28:1 retranslated

How do we now translate 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")?

"The Hebrew is *B'motzaey shabbat b'aloth [amúd] haShachar l'echad b'shabbat* ..., for which the KJV has 'In the end of the Sabbath as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week ...'"

As we have seen, *b'motzaey shabbat* denotes the outgoings from the Sabbath; *b'aloth [amúd] haShachar* is a phrase Gerhard Kemmerer finds most beautiful, meaning "in the rise of the pillar of morning" or, more prosaically, sunrise; and *l'echad b'shabbat* means towards (*l'*), the No. 1 (*echad*) day in the sequence of weekdays leading to the Sabbath.

It does not matter whether this verse is speaking of the evening or the morning of this day, because the entire day is wrapped up under *motzaey*, the outgoings or the exits.

The amended translation becomes "At the dawn of the first day to(wards) the Sabbath . . ." or, more colloquially, "At dawn on Sunday ..."

We have five witnesses for this in the NT: each evangelist and the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul had no need to explain to them what this phrase meant, and this was some 25 to 30 years after the work of the gospel had begun.

Wrapping up

We now know the Pharisee mentioned in Luke 18:12 fasted only every Monday, not on two occasions during the week. (So he was human after all!)

Most important, the New Testament is shown to be Sabbath-centered and Sabbath-oriented, and this can be seen in NT texts written decades after Christ's ascension.

The writers and readers still knew about counting the days with respect to the Sabbath. They still kept the Sabbath central to their reckoning of time. We are not removing the roots of Sunday from the NT--because these roots never existed.

At the conference Gerhard Kemmerer agreed with a comment from the audience that now we have clarification of when Christ rose: early on Sunday, at the

outgoings from the Sabbath.

I don't agree. All we know from the foregoing is that, when the women came to the tomb at dawn, Christ was not in it. It does not of itself prove that He did not rise until after the Sabbath had ended.

Man has a goal and a climax: We are in preparation for the day of rest when man's time merges into God's time. The Sabbath is a constant waymark until, as the Talmud puts it, the time arrives when all will be *shabbat* and rest for the life everlasting.

Reporter's note

Gerhard's lecture made good sense to me because it tied up some exegetical loose ends and clarified some texts, and I decided it would be useful to the Sabbatarian community to make it widely available in some form.

A few years later he and I met again at another conference where we agreed to work towards publication.

For a number of reasons the work proceeded slowly, but even so we made progress. He completed a short book of 23 pages for quick access to the argument and had almost finished a more scholarly one of 89 pages with numerous examples and citations.

I'm sad to report that he died before finishing. His son Ernst and I are collaborating to complete the books and publish them.

Gerhard was a gentle soul, a quiet achiever, strongly and genuinely motivated by a love of God and His truth. The dedication in his books is *Soli Deo Gloria: To God Alone Be the Glory*.

I extend my sympathy to his family and friends and look forward to his healing in God's good time.

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Sidebar: Scholar gave consistent linguistic explanation

The writer is Gerhard Kemmerer's son. This article is based on an introduction he wrote for books written by his father, who died in 2008.

By Ernst Kemmerer

ALBURY, Australia--Shortly after World War II, Gerhard Kemmerer completed his high school with an interest in the languages of Latin and Spanish in Göttingen, in central Germany.

He then began his study of theology at the University of Göttingen and graduated in May 1950 in the faculty of theology. During this time he was a student of Dr. Broukmann in Hebrew and Dr. Möller in the Greek language.

Although of strong Lutheran family history, Gerhard later studied at the Marienhöhe [Seventh-day Adventist] Seminary in Darmstadt and graduated in 1953 in pastoral studies.

However, the desire to travel abroad to Canada or Australia changed his career, and he completed a welding certificate in order to qualify for the skilled-migration program to Australia.

Arriving in Australia in 1962, he worked as a welder for more than 20 years.

During this time he never lost his interest in biblical studies, languages and theological discussions, keeping in contact with both Lutheran and Seventh-day Adventist communities.

In researching the topic of the week in the New Testament, Gerhard Kemmerer brought together a wide range of language skills and persistence, over seven years, in seeking logic and harmony between the texts.

As a result, Gerhard developed a consistent linguistic explanation for the use of the terms *week*, *Sabbath* and *first day of the week* in the New Testament by differentiating between retrospective counting, currently used to refer to the days of the week, compared to forward counting towards or with reference to the Sabbath as used in Jewish tradition.

While this work is not completely new (see R.C.H. Lenski, 1943, and John Lightfoot, 1979), it does demonstrate that through independent and isolated research my father, Gerhard Kemmerer, arrived at the same conclusions, perhaps in a more comprehensive manner.

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