

The Lord's Day

I now turn to Revelation 1:10; namely, John's statement when he was in exile on Patmos: 'I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day'.

Let me say at once that whether or not I can show that 'the Lord's day' is the first day of the week has no bearing on my case thus far. I have shown that the early churches assembled on the first day of the week, did so in a stated and regular fashion, and did so for the enjoyment of their mutual priesthood. If I can now go on to show that the Lord's day is the first day of the week, it will, so to speak, put the icing (frosting) on the cake. It will give an even greater sense that the first day is, for the believer, God's day.

'The Lord's day'! Whichever day it was, John's meaning was obvious to the early churches. This must be so. Since he offered no explanation, clearly none was needed. This is very significant. Which day did he mean – and the believers readily understood? Since the term appears only in the Revelation, that book must set the context for its meaning.

There are two main views which merit serious consideration. Some say John was speaking prophetically; that is, he was referring to 'the day of the Lord', that final, climactic epoch in the history of the world. In other words, John was describing a visionary experience he had while transported to the final day or epoch. Others say he was speaking naturally, literally of a certain day in the week.

Let me examine the first possibility. When John said he was in the Spirit – or in spirit – on the Lord's day, was he talking of 'the last great day of God'? That is, was he saying that while he was on Patmos he was transported in a vision to 'the day of the Lord'? Some scholars say the Greek will bear this, and only this. Others, however, deny it categorically. Let us get to the root of the matter; that is, the text itself.

Are we talking about ‘the day of the Lord’ or ‘the Lord’s day’?

Again, if John intended to speak of the final great day, unaccountably he did not use its normal Septuagint rendering, *hēmera (tou) kuriou*, which other New Testament writers did. It is not that the two phrases are interchangeable. No writer in the New Testament used the phrase ‘the Lord’s day’ to mean ‘the day of the Lord’ – discounting this disputed use in Revelation 1:10. So, why would John deviate from Paul and Peter and their use of the phrase ‘the day of the Lord’ as found in 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:2 and 2 Peter 3:10? These references are all to ‘the day of the Lord’ in both the Greek and English; they all pertain to that final, great day of God. If John had wanted to direct his readers’ minds to *that* day, he would – would he not? – have used the common phrase for it. But he didn’t! Why not?

The Greek is important. It may appear obvious – but it can be forgotten – John’s original readers would have read his words in the Greek, not English. And they would have understood the difference between *tē kuriakē hēmera* and *hēmera (tou) kuriou*.

The two terms, ‘the Lord’s day’ and ‘the day of the Lord’, though similar, are, in fact, radically different. ‘The Lord’s day’ is from a unique phrase in the Greek, *kuriakē hēmera*, which literally reads, ‘the day belonging to the Lord’. The ‘belonging to the Lord’ comes from *kuriakos*, which occurs in the New Testament only here and in 1 Corinthians 11:20, where Paul uses it to refer to ‘the Lord’s supper’ or ‘the supper belonging to the Lord’ (*kuriakon deipnon*). The connection between these two uses must not be missed. It is my conviction that the believers observed the Lord’s supper at the assembly on the Lord’s day – the supper belonging to the Lord on the day belonging to the Lord (the first day of the week), the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, and the day on which the early church met to eat the supper belonging to the Lord. The resurrection and the day and the supper all go together. Note ‘the Lord’s cup’ (*potērion kuriou*), and ‘the Lord’s table’ (*trapezēs kuriou*) (1

Cor. 10:21), ‘the Lord’s death’ (*ton thanaton tou kuriou*) (1 Cor. 11:26), and ‘the Lord’s body’ (*to sōma tou kuriou*) (1 Cor. 11:29). To my mind it is all of a piece: the Lord’s table, the Lord’s cup, the Lord’s body, the Lord’s death, the Lord’s supper and the Lord’s day.¹

Stephen E.Atkerson:

The first evidence of weekly communion is grammatical. To Christians, Sunday is ‘the Lord’s day’ (Rev. 1:10), the day Jesus rose from the dead. This translates unique technical wording in Greek (*kuriakē hēmera*). It is literally ‘the day belonging to the Lord’. The words ‘belonging to the Lord’ are from *kuriakos*, found in the New Testament only in Revelation 1:10 and in 1 Corinthians 11:20, where it refers to the supper ‘belonging to the Lord’ (*kuriakon deipnon*). The connection between these two identical and unusual grammatical uses must not be missed. The *supper* belonging to the Lord was eaten every week on the *day* belonging to the Lord. The Lord’s day, and the Lord’s supper go together as a package deal once a week.²

Such is my conviction.

But what about all this Greek? Having said that the Greek is important, we have a serious problem. Since Greek scholars are divided, what can we do? Clearly it is impossible to decide the question merely on the basis of the Greek – or at least on the basis of what the scholars say the Greek means or does not mean. But we need not be alarmed; in the ultimate it must be so. Think of the alternative. If the resolution of any issue, any difficulty or question in Scripture, *in the final analysis*, depended on minute technical knowledge of the original languages, the vast majority of believers – nearly all believers, in fact – are going to be left in limbo; in fact, left to the mercy of ‘experts’, the linguistic

¹ Also ‘the Lord’s brother’ (*ton adelphon tou kuriou*) (Gal. 1:19), ‘the Lord’s sake’ (*dia ton kurion*) (1 Pet. 2:13).

² Stephen E.Atkerson: *New Testament Church Dynamics: A Leader’s Guide to Biblical Growth & Planting*, New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2018, pp12,65.

scholars. This cannot be right. I say that, even though not a few would like it to be true. They would prefer to hand it (and their souls) over to ‘experts’! And this, of course, would be utterly out of order. Such experts would be given or assume the role of popes! The ‘ordinary’ – the average – reader *must* be able to discover God’s mind in Scripture without *depending on* experts. How can he do it? The context is king. The spiritual man, informed by the Spirit of God (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; Heb. 8:10-11; 1 John 2:27), by using the scriptural context and parallel places, must be able – will be able – to determine God’s mind. Do not run away with the impression that in saying this I decry learning or a thorough investigation of the original languages; far from it! I ask you to note my emphasised words as I wrote them above – *in the final analysis*. In the final analysis, Christians are not in the hands of the scholars. The alternative is, I repeat, popery.

So what of the context? John was physically upon Patmos, in a literal place, at a literal time, literally writing a scroll to literal churches, and at the same time he was transported by the Spirit – or in his spirit – to scenes very different. For instance, in Revelation 4:2, when John ‘was in the Spirit’ or ‘in spirit’, he was transported to heaven to see ‘a throne standing in heaven’, and so on. In Revelation 17:3, John was ‘carried... away in the Spirit’ or ‘in spirit’ ‘into a wilderness’. In Revelation 21:10, John was ‘carried ... away in the Spirit’ or ‘in spirit’ ‘to a great high mountain’. Returning to Revelation 1:10, John was in the Spirit and he immediately saw Christ, or he saw him ‘in spirit’; he saw Christ glorified and standing as judge. As the vision proceeded, John saw and heard Christ judging the churches; as Peter had said, judgment begins ‘at the house of God’ (1 Pet. 4:17-18). In the rest of the Revelation, John was given a vision of Christ acting (in part) as judge throughout this age.

My point is this: are we to believe that ‘in heaven’ (Rev. 4:2), ‘the wilderness’ (Rev. 17:3), ‘a great high mountain’ (Rev. 21:10), and the day of Christ judging the churches of

John's day (Rev. 2 – 3), are all ‘the final day of God in judgment at the return of Christ’? Clearly not.

I find the view that in Revelation 1:10 John was transported to ‘the day of the Lord’, far from satisfying from a contextual standpoint. In all the Revelation references apart from Revelation 1:10, John said he was carried into a different *place*; he was carried into heaven (Rev. 4:2), into a wilderness (Rev. 17:3), into a great and high mountain (Rev. 21:10). In none of these passages did he say he was carried into a different *day* or *time* or *age*. What is more, in Revelation 4:2, when he said: ‘Immediately I was in the Spirit’, John’s main point was to say he was carried into heaven, and he was carried there ‘immediately’. The *time reference* was literal; it was the *place* which was visionary. Returning to Revelation 1:10, on the Lord’s day John was carried by the Spirit... to where? He told us he was carried on the Lord’s day to hear and see Christ in a vision, standing among ‘seven golden lampstands’ (Rev. 1:12-13). Once again, I suggest, the time was literal; it was the sight of Christ which was visionary. Christ was walking among the churches of the day, at that time, not at the final day. All those churches, in accordance with Christ’s warning (Rev. 2:5,16,22-23; 3:3,16), have long since faded into oblivion. All of it was contemporary with John. It was there and then.

Furthermore, the immediate context of Revelation 1:10 is all literal, both as to time and place. That is, although John had a spiritual vision of Christ, and therefore described heavenly scenes in earthly terms, nevertheless – as always in Scripture – John was on the literal, physical island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9), he was there on a literal day, and he had the vision on a literal day. Compare: ‘I was in Patmos on the Lord’s day’ with: ‘I was in Patmos on the last great day of God’.³ To bring this home a little more (since Patmos is hardly a ‘real’ place to most of us), think of this statement: ‘I was in London (New York, Mumbai, or wherever) on the Lord’s day’ with: ‘I was in London (New York, Mumbai, or

³ See below for parallel places in Ezekiel and Daniel.

wherever) on the last great day of God'. Patmos was a literal place; the Lord's day was (and is) a literal day. In short, John was not carried by the Spirit or in spirit *into* the Lord's day, but he was in the Spirit, and was given his vision, *on* the Lord's day.⁴ It reads – to me at least – as though John was in a literal place – Patmos – on a literal day – the Lord's day.

In addition, the vision, immediately flowing out of John's experience on Patmos on the Lord's day, simply will not bear the prophetic interpretation. Christ spoke to John. John recorded his words. Through John, Christ spoke to seven churches – literal, historical churches – meeting in literal, physical towns in Asia – literal, named, known, actual churches of the time. This once again points to the Lord's day being a literal, known day of the week, since the context is literal.

What is more, taking the book as a whole, the events predicted by John cannot be confined to 'the great day of God, the last day'. John did not receive a vision solely of the day of God; and he certainly did not have a vision of it while he was transported into it. The truth is, John saw much more than what will take place on the last day, and the vision he received came to him on a literal day of the week, a day which he called the Lord's day. When I say 'called', I do not imply he coined the phrase. As I have already noted, since John offered no explanation to his readers, it must indicate they all knew which day of the week was meant by 'the Lord's day'. He was using a well-known phrase.

I simply do not see that this entire age can properly be called 'the day of the Lord' in a prophetic sense. This is the age of grace and salvation, is it not? It cannot rightly be called the age of judgment. Christ stands willing to save sinners until that final 'day of the Lord'. I know he stands ready to judge, and that judgment is at the door, and that he

⁴ Here we run into the difficulty bound up with the Greek preposition *en*. This tiny word (in Greek and English), 'in, on, at, with, by, among, during, at the time of', carries a range of nuances. In Acts 20:7 it clearly means 'on'.

is willing and able to judge his churches (1 Pet. 4:17-18; Rev. 2 – 3), but judgment is not *the* characteristic of this age, surely. Although the note of warning *is* sounded throughout the Revelation, the note of mercy is not entirely absent; Christ offers mercy to those who repent throughout Revelation 2 and 3 (Rev. 2:5,7,16,17; 3:3,20). What is more, in those two chapters judgment is said to be future (Rev. 2:5,16,22,23; 3:3,9,10,16). In addition, the gospel invitation is still being issued right at the end of the book (Rev. 22:17).

What is more, Christ's word to John in Revelation 1:19 lends support to the literal view:

Write... the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

Yes, John had to write about ‘things... that are [yet] to take place’, but he also had to write about ‘things... that are’; that is to say, he had to write about things happening at the very time he was on Patmos – current events, contemporary people, at that very time when he saw the exalted Christ, the one who commissioned him to write to the churches of that day.⁵ The timing is literal.

And what of parallel places? We know that when Ezekiel and Daniel received their visions, they were frequently transported in a spiritual sense – by the Spirit – in spirit – to scenes very different to the place where they were physically at that time (Ezek. 1:1-4; 8:1-4; 11:1,5,24; Dan. 7:1ff; 8:1ff; 10:1ff, for instance). In all these passages, the prophets recorded that on a certain date they were granted a vision. Nobody questions that the dates were literal dates; it was the vision which was spiritual. The prophets were transported to scenes very different to their actual surroundings, but it all happened on the very day they said it happened. The same goes for John in Revelation 1:10. The use of parallel places, to my mind, is very convincing indeed. John, like Ezekiel, like Daniel, was given visions. He, like them, had these

⁵ I do not take ‘the things that are’ to be ‘the principles which underlie the history of the world’.

visions on or at a certain definite literal day or date or time. The same goes for other prophets, also (Isa. 6:1ff; Jer. 24:1ff; Zech. 1:1,7). The same applies in the case of Haggai 1:1; 2:1,10,20, except that the prophet received a word from God on those dates – not a vision. But the dates were literal. All of them.

Finally on this point, notice that when John – in Revelation 6:17 and 16:14 – *was* speaking of ‘the day of the Lord’, he called it ‘the great day... the great day of God Almighty’. This confirms the view that the first few chapters (at least) of Revelation do not refer to ‘the day of the Lord’. In other words, John in Revelation 1:10 intended his readers to understand he was in the Spirit – filled, lifted up, endued with, caught up with, enlivened by, moved by – the Holy Spirit – on a certain day of the week, a literal day, in a literal place. He did not intend them to think he received his vision on the great day... the great day of God Almighty.

Before I leave this point, I need to look at another passage. It is only fair that I do so, even though most English readers would not have noticed it, and even though it might work against my thesis. At first glance, and reading it in its English translation, this passage has nothing to say on the subject at all. But, yet again, it is the Greek that holds the key. I refer to these words:

With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but he who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God (1 Cor. 4:3-5).

The relevant words are ‘judged... by a human court’; literally, in the Greek, *hupo anthrōpinēs hēmeras*, ‘man’s day’ (compare *kuriakē hēmera*, ‘Lord’s day’). Why did the English translators of 1 Corinthians 4:3 not use ‘day’, but plumped for ‘court’ or ‘judgment’? Because they rightly caught Paul’s use of a Hebraism. Indeed, this use has come

into English with the word ‘daysman’ (Job 9:33) (or umpire, arbiter). In 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, Paul was drawing a clear contrast between ‘man’s day’, ‘man’s time’ and the (unstated) ‘day of the Lord’. He was referring to ‘man’s day’ versus ‘God’s day’. See also 1 Corinthians 1:8; 4:5; 5:5.

So what is the point I am trying to make? Could this idea apply to Revelation 1:10? Was John in the Spirit, not on ‘man’s day’, but on ‘God’s day’; that is, the final great day of judgment? It is possible, yes. And we each have to decide. For the reasons I have given, I am persuaded that ‘the Lord’s day’ (Rev. 1:10) is John’s designation of the first day of the week, and not that final, climactic day, and that it was so understood by his readers.

So, to my mind, the Lord’s day of Revelation 1:10 is a day of the week, not the final, great day of Christ. Which day did John’s readers understand by this uniquely Christian phrase, ‘the Lord’s day’? By the time John wrote, it is true, the Romans – and not believers – had coined the Greek word *kuriakos*, ‘belonging to the Lord’, probably in an official document of AD68 in reference to the Imperial treasury. This Greek word used by the Romans – in a secular context, of course – is the masculine, of which the biblical word *kuriakē* is the feminine, ‘relating to the Lord’. But as I have said, in terms of a day of the week, ‘the Lord’s day’ was and is a uniquely Christian phrase.

Archibald Thomas Robertson made this observation:

‘On the Lord’s day’ (*en tē kuriakē hēmera*): [Gustav Adolf] Deissmann has proved ([see his] *Bible Studies...*; *Light from the Ancient East...*) from inscriptions and papyri that the word *kuriakos* was in common use for the sense ‘imperial’ as ‘imperial finance’ and ‘imperial treasury’; and from papyri and pieces of pottery [he has shown] that Augustus Day was the first day of each month, [the] Emperor’s day, on which money payments were made (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:1ff).⁶ It was easy, therefore, for the Christians to take this term, already in use, and apply it to the first day of the week in

⁶ See the note to this reference in the previous chapter.

honour of the Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection on that day. [Robertson cited the *Didache* and Ignatius]. In the New Testament the word occurs only here and 1 Corinthians 11:20 (in the Greek for 'the Lord's supper'). It has no reference to *hēmera kuriou* (the day of judgment, 2 Peter 3:10).⁷

By the time John wrote the Revelation, the churches must have been using the term 'the Lord's day'; it must have been passing as common currency among them, otherwise John's words would have been meaningless. To illustrate: if I told you, reader, that I did something on *Squiggle day*, you wouldn't have a clue which day I was talking about. But if I said I did something on Tuesday, you would know at once which day I meant. For me to talk about *Squiggle day* – without any explanation – would make the sentence pointless and give my report the air of the ridiculous, since you don't know which day I mean. John's readers must have known what *he* meant by 'the Lord's day'. And if, as I have tried to show, it was a literal day of the week, then we know that the saints – nobody else, of course – were pleased to call one day of the week 'the Lord's day'. This is how they talked, at least among themselves; this was their special language. And whatever day of the week they may have meant by 'the Lord's day', it surely signified at the very least 'the day of the week devoted to the Lord'.

Which day did they mean? My answer will be obvious: the first day. I say this, not because of my cultural and institutional background, but because of the scriptural case I have tried to build. But here is one of the weakest links in my chain. I confess it. Even so, to my mind at least, there is a chain, a *scriptural* chain, however tenuous its weakest link.

The only source for finding out which day, scripturally speaking, is 'the Lord's day', is the New Testament. Now, I admit there is no clear verse to tell us, although post-apostolic church history is replete with evidence of which

⁷ Archibald Thomas Robertson: *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Christ Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids.

day *they* understood the early Christians to mean. This, however, is not good enough. It is Scripture which dictates, not the writings of mere men. We must not allow ourselves to read an institutional invention of the Fathers back into the New Testament. So what can we learn from the New Testament? Well, even though we do not have a plain verse which sets out the matter in black and white, New Testament help is at hand. As I say, this is no more than it should be. If we cannot establish by the New Testament which day is the Lord's day, it cannot be essential for church life. If we need to go outside Scripture, then inevitably we are floundering in the dark, and have lost our way. God condemns those who invent ways of worship for themselves – those who introduce ‘the commandments and doctrines of men... self-imposed worship’ (Col. 2:22-23). So what can we learn from the New Testament?

The similarity between the two phrases, ‘the Lord's day’ (Rev. 1:10) and ‘the Lord's supper’ (1 Cor. 11:20), is striking.⁸ I do not want to push the similarity any further than the evidence allows, but nevertheless the two phrases certainly spring to mind in tandem, to me at least. Christ instituted his supper; he gave it to his churches that they might keep it in order to remember and worship him, their Redeemer; he gave it as a perpetual ordinance to be observed right to the end of the age (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Did he do something similar for ‘the Lord's day’? There is no equivalent text. So did the early church, through the apostles, make the leap? Yet again, we have no text.

Could it be the day of the week prophetically spoken of in the Old Testament? For instance, in these words: ‘This is the day which the LORD has made; we will be glad and rejoice in it’ (Ps. 118:24). I agree at once that there is more to these words than the weekly Lord's day,⁹ but is this much in them? The words need to be read in their context from

⁸ Not forgetting ‘the Lord's cup’, ‘the Lord's table’, ‘the Lord's death’, ‘the Lord's body’.

⁹ Indeed, I am sure they speak of the entire gospel age.

verse 19 onwards: ‘Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go through them, and I will praise the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD, through which the righteous shall enter...’. This was a prophecy of the new covenant. Clearly it spoke of gatherings for worship, in old-covenant language it is true, but there is no difficulty about this.¹⁰ The psalmist’s prophecy has its fulfilment in Christ, he is ‘the stone which the builders rejected’, he ‘has become the chief cornerstone’ (verse 22). How frequently these words are applied to Christ in the New Testament (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7; see also Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 1:6).

In bringing this chapter to a close, and linking it with the previous chapter, I am only too well aware that I have not *proved* that the Lord’s day is the first day of the week. I frankly admit it. Whether or not my work has convinced or confirmed you, reader, only you can say. The question is: What can we properly deduce from these passages? Why is it recorded that the church at Troas met for spiritual activities on the first day of the week? Why did Paul command the churches of Corinth and Galatia to set aside money on the first day of the week? He did not command them to get their hair cut on a certain day, did he? Nor did he command them to set aside the money on the last day of the week. And to those who are convinced that Revelation 1:10 refers to a literal day, I pose this question: which day is it, if it is not the first day of the week? And, supposing they think there is a day for assembly purposes, but it is not the Lord’s day, the first day, what is their argument for *their* day? What evidence do they have to support their case? And as for those who keep no day whatsoever, what do they think these three passages mean? Are they meaningless? Of course not! So, I ask again, what *do* they mean?

This of course, leads me on to the crunch question. We know that Christ instituted and established and commanded the church to keep his supper, ‘the Lord’s supper’ (Matt. 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26).

¹⁰ See my *Christ; Psalm 119; Ezekiel; Sanctification in Jeremiah*.

In so doing, he laid out its terms (1 Cor. 11:23). Where in the New Testament did Christ do the same for ‘the Lord’s day’? As before, I freely admit that I cannot supply a plain passage where Christ’s institutional command for the Lord’s day is set out. No. But there is New Testament evidence to show that Christ gathered with his disciples on the first day of the week. I do not intend to say that Christ will presence himself among his people only on that day – certainly not. But it is definitely recorded that he did assemble with his disciples on the first day of the week.

As I read the New Testament, I can come to one conclusion and one only: ‘the Lord’s day’ was the way the early believers came to describe the first day of the week.

So, how did ‘the Lord’s day’ get its designation? Directly by Christ? I doubt it. At least I have no evidence that he laid down a commandment such as: ‘Keep the Lord’s day’. Having said that, we know that he taught his disciples many things after his resurrection. But, even so, I cannot claim he used the term ‘the Lord’s day’. Indeed, I am pretty sure he did not – otherwise it would have appeared in the scriptural record long before Revelation 1:10.

So who first used ‘the Lord’s day’? Could it not be the same kind of man who first used ‘the Lord’s supper’, ‘the Lord’s table’, ‘the Lord’s cup’, ‘the Lord’s death’ or ‘the Lord’s body’? Who was that man or woman? Does anybody know?¹¹ Even so, all these phrases are scriptural.

I now move on to set out the evidence that Christ, by repeated practice, drew the disciples’ attention to assemble on the first day. I put it no stronger than that. But I do put it that strongly!

¹¹ I know, of course, who first used such phrases in Scripture, and we are virtually certain to assume that he was coining them at the time, but we cannot be absolutely certain, can we?